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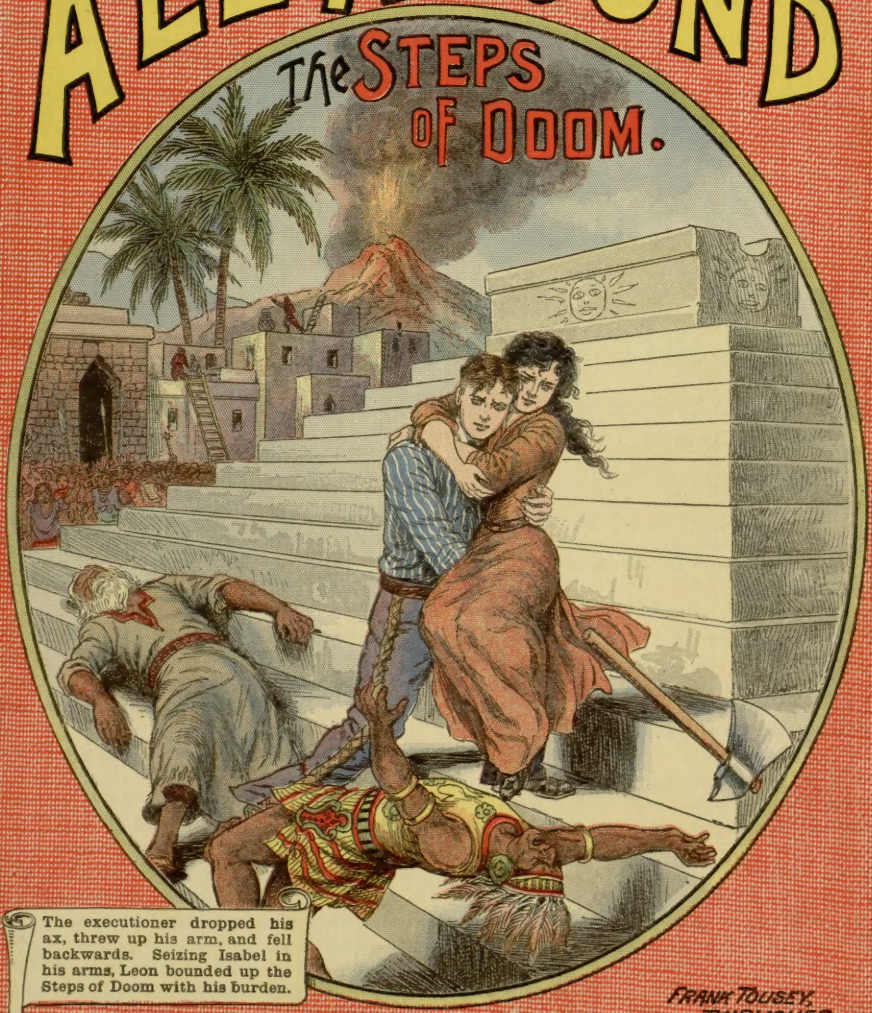
ALL AROUND WEEKLY.

The STEPS of DOOM.



The executioner dropped his ax, threw up his arm, and fell backwards. Seizing Isabel in his arms, Leon bounded up the Steps of Doom with his burden.

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ALL AROUND WEEKLY

CONTAINING STORIES OF ALL KINDS

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THE STEPS OF DOOM

A TALE OF THE LAND OF THE INCAS

By L. PHILIPS

CHAPTER I.

THE FUGITIVES OF THE LAS MARIAS—THE RENEGADE OUTLAW.

Nicaragua, the land of the ancient Incas, where mysterious temples, strange idols and grotesquely sculptured monuments still remain, telling that silent story of the strange race who inhabited Central America in former days.

It is to this land we ask our readers to follow us in this story.

Nicaragua derives its name from the cognomen of an ancient king of the Incas, who governed the state, or, at least, the greater portion of it, at the time of the first invasion of Central America by the Spaniards, under Gonzales de Aula, in the year 1522.

At the close of a delightful day, nearly a century ago, a "pitpau," or long, sharp-pointed canoe, pulled by a crew of natives, stripped to the waist, was skimming along the Las Marias River, a considerable stream, which empties in Lake Nicaragua, near what is now the town of Miguelete, on the southeastern coast.

The Indians who formed the crew of the pitpau belonged to that division of the race of the Incas called Melchoras, who inhabit the, even at this day, almost unknown district through which the Las Marias flows.

But all the occupants of the canoe were not of the Indian race; on the contrary, there were three white persons on board.

These three, of whom one was a young girl not more than fifteen, but, thanks to the climate, already a fully-developed woman, were Spanish.

The girl's two white companions were a young man, perhaps three or four years her senior in age, and an old man, over whose gray head nearly three score years must have passed.

The girl and the young man bore to each other the relation of brother and sister, and the old man was an attache of the family, of which they were the youngest representatives.

The name of the young senorita was Isabel Gonzales, and that of the brother was Leon.

Their family name was the same as that of the first invader of Nicaragua, and they claimed descent from that illustrious Spanish marauder.

Pedro Roma was the name of their aged companion.

Ferdinand Gonzales, the father of Isabel and Leon, was the owner of a hacienda and indigo plantation near the mouth of the Las Marias.

The times of which we are writing were troublous. Nicaragua was in an unsettled state, and bands of renegade Spaniards and Indians devastated the country everywhere.

The day preceding the one with which our narrative opens, the hacienda of Ferdinand Gonzales had been suddenly attacked by the bandit band of Juan Munzo, who was at that time the terror of the unprotected settlements of Nicaragua.

Outlawed by the Spanish Government, Juan Munzo had fled to the warlike tribe of Indians called Melchoras, and gathering about him a band of kindred spirits among the reckless, adventure-loving Spanish soldiery, he became the greatest bandit of his time.

So sudden had been the attack of the bandits upon Senor Gonzales' plantation that no effectual resistance could be made; and, indeed, even if he had been warned of the attack, the result might have been the same, for the small force of Indians who were employed upon the plantation would hardly have been sufficient to repel the attack of the bandit chief.

The two children of the Spanish planter had seen their father fall beneath the sword of one of the lawless band of Juan Munzo, but thanks to the devotion of old Pedro Roma and the four native Nicaraguans, who composed the crew of the pitpau in which they are introduced to our readers, Isabel and Leon Gonzales had escaped in the confusion of the outlaw's attack, and they had taken to the river in the canoe.

They now hoped to make their way to the Spanish mission of San de Cappello, a little station established by Catholic priests farther up the river, but long since abolished.

At San de Capello they had numerous friends, and there they felt they would be safe, at least for the present.

Suddenly Leon Gonzales uttered a cry of pain, and with his right hand clutched his left wrist convulsively.

"What is it?" cried the young senorita.

"What has happened?" asked Pedro Roma.

The Indians stopped rowing.

"El Alacrau del monte!" (scorpion of the mountain) cried Leon; "I am bitten."

"Let me examine the bite," said old Pedro.

Writhing with pain, Leon presented his already red and somewhat swollen wrist.

Old Pedro was somewhat of a physician in a humble way, being learned in the medicinal properties of the roots and herbs of the country.

"Is it not easily cured—the bite of the scorpion?" asked the Senorita Isabel.

"Not always; the sting of the scorpion sometimes induces fever—causing the tongue to swell so as to render utterance difficult or impossible," answered Pedro.

"The pain is most excruciating," said Leon.

"We must land that I may gather some herbs to bind upon the wound, or the consequences may be serious," said Pedro.

"But the delay may be attended with great danger. Munzo may have discovered that we took to the river, and although we have thus far observed no signs of pursuit, his terrible band may even now be close at hand," answered Leon.

"Your life, signor, may hang upon your decision. Give the order to land, I implore you," answered Pedro.

"There is one with us whose safety I value more than my own life," Leon replied, glancing affectionately at Isabel.

"True! true!" assented Pedro.

"Oh, brother, think not of me; your arm must have immediate attention," cried Isabel, who overheard all that was said.

"Be it so, then. Pull the canoe to the bank, my good men," said Leon, somewhat reluctantly.

The young man cast an anxious glance back over the river, but as far as the eye could reach the water was deserted. No signs of the enemy were to be discovered.

The native boatmen skilfully drove their canoe into an inlet, and it soon grounded upon a projecting sand bar.

Pedro leaped ashore.

Immediately he began searching for the herbs which he desired, while all the other members of the party remained in the pitpau, ready to pull for their lives should the enemy appear.

Pedro vanished in the luxuriant vegetation.

The faithful old servitor of the Gonzales family had been absent a quarter of an hour, when suddenly the startled ears of the occupants of the canoe were greeted by a loud yell, quickly followed by a chorus of shouts and whoops.

Too well the fugitives in the canoe knew that these yells were the war cries of the savage Melchoras under Juan Munzo, the Spanish outlaw.

To their horror, in a moment they saw upon both banks of the river, coming over the route which they had traversed, a horde of savages.

"To the river! to the river!" shouted Leon.

"Will you leave poor Pedro behind?" asked Isabel, reproachfully.

"Pedro is well able to avoid his foes. None more skilful in forest craft than he," answered Leon.

The native boatmen propelled the boat out into the river again.

Plying their oars, they sent the canoe over the water at a rapid rate.

But at this moment Leon uttered an exclamation of surprise and consternation.

"The bougos! (large canoe). The outlaws are pursuing us by water as well as by land!" he cried.

It was so, for that moment a very large canoe came in sight down the river.

The canoe was manned by twelve oarsmen, and it was

freighted with a throng of white and native outlaws, who covered every available space upon it.

Near the stern was a small space called a chopa, which was thatched with palm leaves.

Upon a narrow deck in front of the chopa, the fugitives saw the figure of a man of most commanding presence.

This personage was clad in a semi-savage costume, and even the distant view of him was enough to enable them to recognize the terrible bandit chief.

The man was none other than Juan Munzo, the renegade and outlaw.

Had the fugitives been a little nearer the renegade they could have seen upon the breast of the close-fitting jacket of white material which he wore, the device in red, of a large iguana, the most loathsome, ugly-looking creature to be found in the forests of Central America.

Imagine an ugly snake, provided with a head and tail and four legs, and you have an idea of the animal which the bandit had chosen for his emblem. Upon his head, Munzo wore a real turban and dancing plume, worn after the style of the mailed Conquistadors.

"Pull for your lives, my men!" shouted Leon Gonzales the moment he saw the rapidly approaching war canoe.

The native boatmen pulled with all their might, but the bougos gained rapidly upon them.

The crew of the outlaw's band set up a renewed chorus of yells.

The pursuers now felt confident of overtaking the fugitives, who were making the most frantic efforts at escape.

Why was it that the bandit chief was so anxious to capture the boat commanded by Leon Gonzales?

The answer might be made in one word—Isabel.

The outlaw had determined to make the lovely Spanish girl his wife.

Moreover, he had a desire to take vengeance upon the entire family of Gonzales.

In the years that had passed there had been a bitter feud between the houses of Gonzales and Munzo, of which Don Gonzales, Isabel and Leon's father, and the outlawed renegade, were now the sole surviving representatives.

Leon Gonzales saw with despair that the merciless Munzo would soon overtake him, and as he thought of the fate which would befall his sister, he experienced the greatest mental agony—little less painful than the physical suffering which the scorpion's bite occasioned him.

The poison of the scorpion had permeated the young man's entire system, and he was consumed by fever.

The youth felt that his tongue was rapidly swelling, and he was convinced that if his symptoms did not change, he would soon be entirely speechless.

"Oh, brother! brother!" cried Isabel. "I am dying with fear. Death would be preferable to captivity. Kill me with your own hand, Leon, rather than let me fall into the hands of yon dreadful man."

"Sister, I cannot take your life, even to save you from the monster who seeks to capture us. I would die for you, and I'll fight to the last. They shall only tear you from me when my life has been given up in your defense," was the brother's answer.

In another moment the foe would be upon our friends. Leon drew his sword.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECRET CITY OF THE INCAS—THE STEPS OF DOOM.

At the date of this story the greater portion of Central America was an unknown land, and the few venturesome descendants of the Castilian conquerors, who had settled upon the coast and lake, had not ventured upon exploring the vast tracks of wilderness and mountains in the interior.

It is safe to presume that, however, had they ventured to penetrate the depths of the mysterious land of the Incas, they would never have discovered the wonderful secret city of the Incas, to which we are about to conduct our readers, for nature had apparently exerted her skill to shelter and seclude it from discovery.

Journeying to the northward from Lake Nicaragua, one first came upon a country clothed with vegetables, and fruitful in the products for which the land is noted.

The coca tree and the plantain, the wild indigo and the medicinal herbs abounded.

Many miles further the character of the country changes, the earth is strewn with scoria, solidified lava, and the varied debris of volcanic origin.

Beyond this land of desolation rises the mist-clouded domes, spires and minarets of the distant mountains.

The rising sun shoots a brilliant coronet of rays above the fantastic outlines of these volcanic mountains as we look upon them.

Thin columns of smoke rise almost perpendicularly from the summits of these mystic mounts, in whose fathomless craters smoulder the everlasting fires of the never quite extinct volcanoes.

Beyond this volcanic range, walled in upon every side, and only to be reached by a secret pass, known only to the inhabitants of the secret city, lay a beautiful valley, in the center of which stood the wonderful Secret City of the Incas.

This hidden habitation was beautifully constructed, the architectural adornments giving evidence of a skill and taste in building unsurpassed by modern builders.

The plains surrounding the city were most fertile and

the streams and lakelets abounded in fish, while the forest afforded an unlimited supply of game.

The dwellers in this secret city had no necessity to leave their little world.

The valley supplied all their wants.

The people who inhabited this wondrous valley seldom journeyed beyond its confines.

They were a tribe of the ancient Incas, to whose home the rapacious European, with an unsatiable thirst for gold, was yet a stranger.

Here the Incas worshiped the idols of their fathers in peace and quiet.

In this hidden city still reposed the vast wealth which the tribe had accumulated.

In the center of the city was a grand plaza, and placed at an equal distance from every side of the square stood a remarkable structure.

This edifice was a solid stone structure, in the form of a cube.

The summit was composed of smooth, flat and highly-polished stone.

Across each of the four sides of this lofty cube extended a flight of broad steps of white stone, which reached to the flat top of the square.

At the four corners were erected four massive idols, representing the four principal gods of the Incas.

These idols were apparently of solid gold, and priceless jewels gleamed in their eyes and ornamented other portions of their hideous and fantastic forms.

This remarkable structure in the plaza of the secret city was the Incas' great altar of sacrifice, upon which human beings were offered as gifts to the hideous idols we have described.

The broad steps leading to its summit were called by the Incas "The Steps of Doom."

For no human being, whom the priest of death led up those fatal steps, ever descended them alive.

The victims of the sacrifice were captives taken from the tribes, and criminals and malefactors of their own people.

At the time of which we write a plague was raging in the secret city, and its inhabitants were being swept into the grave by the pestilence in multitudes.

The priests declared that the gods of the Incas were angry with the people of the hidden city, and one Zoda, the chief priest of the sacrifice and guardian of the steps of doom, professed to have had a vision in which it had been revealed to him that only the sacrifice of two human offerings of the "race who came to the land in ships," (meaning the Spaniards), of whom one should be a male and the other a female, would appease the wrath of the gods, and end the dire misfortunes which the malignant plague had brought upon them.

Montemora, the king of the city, had thereupon promulgated an edict that any white person falling into the hands of the tribe, should be reserved for the sacrifice.

As no white man had ever set foot in the city, and the possibility of capturing one was seemingly beyond the range of their power, this edict afforded the populace but trifling satisfaction.

Upon the morning when we look upon the Secret City, a number of the priests and high officials of the Incas are assembled at the foot of the steps of doom.

After the customary forms of worship had been concluded, the devotees began to converse among themselves.

"It is now three periods (meaning weeks) since our good Halualala, the priest of the mountain temple, has been absent from the city upon a mission to that branch of our race who dwell in the far countries of the great Montezumas (King of the Aztecs in Mexico) and we may now expect his return at any day," said Zoda, the chief priest of the sacrifice and guardian of the steps of doom.

"It was not until after his departure that the plague made its appearance among our people. Would that his return might bring immunity from the wrath of our gods and relieve us of the scourge," said another priest.

"Naught but the white sacrifice, male and female, can free us from the plague, according to my vision," was Zoda's answer.

"Heretofore, good Zoda, as you well know, it has been our faith to regard white sacrifices as an abomination to our faith and to our gods. And heretofore, had any white person come peaceably within our city, they would have been safe from all fear of the sacrifice, or indeed, of any ill-treatment at our hands," said Zoda's fellow priest.

"True," answered the other, "but now all that is changed, and now no power on earth could save the white man or woman who should enter our city. The edict of our king has gone forth, and they would be sacrificed upon this altar."

"Alas," was the mournful answer, "we can hope for no such good fortune as the arrival of any white person; for none has ever set foot in this part of the country. Formerly we congratulated ourselves upon this fact, and kept the very existence of our hidden city a sacred secret from the white invaders," said Zoda after a pause.

At this moment there was a sound of clashing cymbals, and a procession headed by several priests in flowing white robes, who bore in their hands offerings of fruits, flowers, and the carcass of a sheep, appeared, coming from the king's palace.

As the approaching procession drew nearer a mournful chant came to the ears of Zoda and his companions.

"What new calamity has befallen us? The priests of

the palace are chanting the dirge of mourning," cried Zoda.

In a few moments the king and his priests arrived at the foot of the steps of doom.

All bowed to the earth.

The offerings were placed upon the steps.

And while the king was engaged in his devotion, Zoda drew one of the priests aside and asked in a low voice the cause of the chant of mourning.

"Evil has come upon our king. The fatal plague has entered the palace of the ruler of the Incas, and one of the royal family has this morning fallen very ill. The king's only son, Lesandlas, has taken the dire malady which is filling our death vaults.

"The good medicine-maker, Polva, says that he must die, and the king is nearly frantic with grief. Woe, woe unto us! The gods frown more and more darkly, and there is no way of ending the plague."

Thus spake the priest of the people.

"This is indeed most evil news," said Zoda, turning away to communicate the sad intelligence to his followers.

Before midday every one knew that the young Prince Lesandlas was ill of the terrible disease which was sweeping over the city.

The best medical skill was secured, and the native doctors made every effort in their power to arrest the progress of the malady in the case of their beloved prince.

Fate seemed to have ordained that he should perish, however, for his symptoms constantly grew more alarming.

In the prison (for this well-governed city had a prison) lay a man who had been adjudged guilty of murder. He was an Inca, but he was before sundown of the day of which we are writing led up the steps of doom and beheaded as a sacrifice to the gods in behalf of the stricken prince.

A vast concourse of people assembled to witness the sacrifice, and many of the idolaters indulged in the hope that the gods would look with favor upon this human offering.

Next day, however, the young prince's symptoms betokened no improvement.

The priests spent the day in religious devotions, in which the populace, or, at least, such of them as had not as yet been stricken down by the plague, joined.

The king offered a sack of gold to any one who would cure his only son, but no one offered to strive for this reward except the regular doctors, who were already doing what they could for their royal patient.

There was no doubt that the young prince of the Incas would surely die unless some one more skilful than any of their own people came to his relief.

Lesandlas was the last of the royal family, and, if he perished, there would be a new dynasty in the secret city.

Montemora, the king of the city, was wrapped up in his son, and in the strength of his devotion he would have willingly given his own life to save that of his son.

The relentless hand which levels all rank, and makes king and peasant equal, was a power which all the wealth of the Incas could not bribe, and the king of the secret city for once found himself in the power of a hand more mighty than that of man—the hand of death.

Throughout the livelong night the aged king of the Incas watched beside the couch of his son, calling vainly upon all the gods of his faith to restore the young prince to health.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTURED—PEDRO ROMA RETURNS—LOST IN THE FOREST.

The precarious situation in which we left the Spanish fugitives, was one calculated to awaken a sentiment of fear in any heart.

As Leon drew his sword, while Isabel crouched at his feet, the bougos of Juan Munzo shot up alongside of their canoe.

Leon's Indian servitors leaped into the river and swam to the shore, where some fell beneath the spears of the renegade savages, and a few escaped into the dense forest.

Thus deserted, Leon's cause was a hopeless one, and although he made a brave and determined resistance, he was quickly overpowered and bound.

The bougos was then propelled to the shore.

"Where is that rascal, Pedro Roma, who aided you to escape from the hacienda?" demanded Juan Munzo of Isabel, seizing her roughly by the arm, and compelling her to face him.

"I know not," answered the girl, trembling in every limb.

"That is false. Come, no lies, tell me instantly what has become of Roma or it will be the worse for you, my girl," continued Munzo, shaking Isabel violently.

The poor girl was determined not to put the renegade upon the track of the faithful Roma, if she could avoid so doing, and she made answer:

"I tell you I know not, and can say no more."

Munzo flung her aside roughly.

"Very well, since you choose to be obstinate, so be it. Were it not for spoiling your beauty—which I wish to preserve for my future enjoyment—I would soon wring the truth from you; but this young sprig of your hated

race shall answer me, or I torture him unto his death!" said the renegade, savagely turning upon Leon.

"Speak!" he went on. "What has become of Pedro Roma, I demand?"

Leon strove to speak, but, to his horror, he found that he was powerless to do so. The bite of the scorpion had caused his tongue to swell so that he could not articulate a word.

Munzo uttered an oath.

"I'll open your lips for you!" he said. "Here, Salvator, slip your poniard into his mouth."

A brutal looking Spanish outlaw whipped out his knife, and darted forward to execute the fiendish command.

With a shriek, Isabel sprang before her brother and threw herself at Munzo's feet.

"Spare him! He cannot speak, the bite of the scorpion has paralyzed his tongue. Spare him and I will tell you all I know," she cried.

"Very well, speak out then at once, or we'll spoil your brother's beauty forever; Salvator, put up your weapon," said Munzo.

"Pedro went into the forest to gather herbs to bind upon the wound which the scorpion gave Leon, and while he was absent we discovered your bougos and we put off, leaving good Pedro behind," Isabel said.

"Ha! then some of my Indian allies will capture him. Here, Maztec, take a dozen of your yellow brethren and scour the forest for the missing man," ordered Munzo.

The Indian addressed obeyed.

"He will not long escape the keen and cunning Maztec," said Munzo, as he saw his natives depart to search for Roma.

"I shall take you to my stronghold in the depths of the forest, and you, Leon Gonzales, shall die to appease my thirst for revenge upon your race, while you, fair maiden, shall become my wife. The princess of the bandits you shall be. Ha! ha! ha!" and the renegade laughed sardonically.

Leon ground his teeth with impotent rage.

Isabel shivered at thought of the terrible fate in store for her.

"We shall camp here for the night," said the renegade, and thereupon he ordered his two young prisoners to be placed in the thatched apartment of the bougos.

A couple of natives were placed on guard upon the little deck in front of the bougos, although bound as they were, there seemed to be little possibility of the prisoners making any attempts at escape.

The marauders had secured much plunder from the devastated plantation, and among other things a good supply of wine.

The camp once fully established, the bandits and their native allies began to feast and drink.

It was Munzo's policy to afford his reckless followers all the pleasure he safely could and he attempted not to restrain them.

Until a late hour the outlaws continued their feasting and drinking, and it was not until the supply of wine was pretty well exhausted, and they were nearly all more or less intoxicated, that silence came upon the camp, and sleep enchained the senses of the band.

All slept save the two native guards upon the deck of the bougos.

These two men had not drank to excess, and they were alert and watchful.

It was their nature to be thus.

Munzo had chosen them well.

Far more reliable were they than any of his white followers at a time like this.

The night was not very dark.

It was one of those evenings when the moon seems to be partially obscured by a film.

As the hours of the night stole on, the forest became silent.

The monkeys that had been chattering in the neighboring trees were quiet; the alligators in the river, which had been giving vent to their nocturnal bellows, were still. The countless birds that had twittered among the boughs ceased their melody. Only the noise of the flowing river broke the stillness.

The two native guards sat close together upon the deck of the bougos, directly before the door of the cabin in which Leon and Isabel were confined.

The tall rushes that grew close down to the water's edge all along the bank of the river, against which the renegade's vessel rested, after a time began to wave and rustle slightly, and yet there was no wind to stir them.

The native guards observed the phenomenon, but they heeded it not, thinking that the movement of the rushes was occasioned by the passage of some animal; probably an alligator seeking food among the succulent roots which this peculiar variety of marsh reed affords.

Could the natives' sight have penetrated the rush jungle, however, they would have seen that it was no alligator that caused the commotion in the rushes.

No, it was a man.

More—a white man.

Bending low and moving as silently as he could, this man, whom we recognize at a glance to be Pedro Roma, was stealing toward the thatch-covered cabin of the bougos.

In his right hand Pedro grasped a dagger.

The faithful servitor of the family of Gonzales was about to make an attempt to rescue his young master and mistress.

Nearer and yet nearer crept Pedro to the bougos.

Still his proximity was not suspected by the native guards.

He reached the stern of the huge canoe.

The side of the cabin was reached.

Pedro raised himself and thrust his knife through the frail matting which formed the side of the cabin.

There was a movement within, but no outcry.

Pedro placed his lips to the opening which his knife had made, and whispered:

"It is I, Pedro. Make no sound."

Isabel whispered back:

"We are as silent as the grave."

Cautiously now, Pedro enlarged the opening which his knife had made, until it was large enough to admit of Isabel and Leon's passage through it.

The native guards were still ignorant of all this.

Silently Isabel passed through the pening in the wall of the cabin, and without a sound sank down out of sight in the reeds.

A moment later and Leon followed her.

It was a breathless moment.

A moment when their safety hung upon a very slender thread.

If the natives heard them they were lost.

If the guards now should have chanced to glance within the cabin they could not have hoped to escape. Quickly with his dagger, Roma severed the bonds which secured our young fugitives, and then slowly and silently they crawled away up the river, keeping among the reeds until a bend of the stream hid them from the renegade's boat, and the distance was so great that the sound of their movements could no longer reach the ears of their foes.

This point gained, they left the river bank and plunged into the forest.

"I think I can lead you to the mission, although I have but once visited it, and then by water," said Roma. "But before proceeding further, I must attend to the wounds of our young friend here, my good master Leon, for I see that the poison of the scorpion has even now taken a deep hold upon his system, and it were not well to longer delay the application of the herb which I have procured."

So saying, Roma produced a handful of leaves from his pocket, and having bruised them into a pulp, he bound the rude poultice upon the bite of the scorpion on Leon's wrist.

This done, he gave the youth a quantity of the same leaves, and ordered him to chew them.

They at once continued their flight after this, and Isabel related all that had transpired after Roma's departure.

They heard no sounds that would indicate that their escape was discovered, but they hurried forward at a rapid pace for a couple of hours.

Isabel, unaccustomed to such hardships, felt her strength failing, and Pedro Roma, noticing that his young mistress was exhausted, took her in his strong arms and thus the flight was continued.

The application which Pedro had bound upon Leon's arm was fast subduing his fever and the swelling of his tongue ceased. Gradually it began to subside, and not more than three hours from the time of his having received the poultice and the leaves he could speak again.

When day dawned, our friends were a long distance from the encampment of the renegade and they began to feel quite secure.

As soon as it was light enough to see, Roma scanned the country on every hand, for he began to fear that in the hurry of the recent escape he had wandered from the direction which he should have taken to reach the mission of San de Cappello.

Skilled woodman as he was, he was now forced to acknowledge that he was at fault. He had no idea of the direction he should take. In short, Pedro was lost.

CHAPTER IV.

WANDERING IN THE FOREST—THE TORNADO—MEETING WITH THE PRIEST OF THE SECRET CITY.

When the startling conviction that he knew not which way to go ahead forced itself upon Pedro Roma's mind, the kind-hearted old servitor felt a terrible sinking at the heart.

Pedro knew that it was a serious thing to be lost in the wilds of Nicaragua.

There was little hope of meeting with any human creature who could set him right as to the proper course which he should pursue, and he knew that he might wander for months in the forest without finding his way out.

Then, too, there were numerous perils.

The hostile savages.

The beasts of prey.

As Pedro reflected upon his situation and that of his young companions, his spirit became more and more troubled.

Pedro, in the kindness of his heart, hesitated about informing his young master and mistress of the truth.

Isabel and Leon were both keen observers, and they soon discovered that there was something of an unpleasant nature on the old servitor's mind.

Moreover, the anxious glances which Pedro cast about him, and the uncertainty which he exhibited in his movements, excited the young people's suspicions that all was not right.

"I am assured, good Pedro, that something troubles you,"

said Leon. "Tell us what it is. You have fears; you are anxious and ill at ease. What causes you these emotions?"

"You have keen eyes, my young master. You read my thoughts, almost. I do not wish to alarm you needlessly, but, to say the truth, I have lost my way, and I have no idea of the course we should take to reach the mission of San de Cappello, where we have friends," answered Pedro.

"Then we are lost, indeed!" exclaimed Isabel in a frightened voice.

"But we may find our way to the mission in safety after all," said Pedro, striving to appear more hopeful than at heart he really was.

"That is very doubtful, good Pedro. If so skilful a woodsman as yourself is at fault there is little hope, I should think," answered Isabel.

"Anything is better than captivity at the hands of Juan Munzo, dear sister, and it may be that our having strayed from the course which leads direct to the mission has proven our salvation after all. For you know that when our escape becomes known the renegade will naturally seek for us on the route to the nearest Spanish port," said Leon.

"There is wisdom in what you say. Let us hope for the best and keep up our spirits; and now for some breakfast," said Pedro cheerily.

The thoughtful woodsman unslung a knapsack from his back and produced food, of which they all partook.

After an hour's rest, during which time Pedro took an observation of the sun as best he could, our friends set out upon a new course, which Pedro's reflections had led him to fancy to be the direction which they desired to pursue.

The march was continued all day.

The aspect of the country grew more and more wild and broken.

The animals seemed tame, like those who have not yet learned to fear the presence of man.

Old Pedro Roma noticed all these things.

Before night he was satisfied that he had gained nothing by changing his course in the morning.

The old servitor was now confident that he was penetrating a country through which man had seldom, if ever, passed.

When our wanderers halted for the night, they consumed the last of the food which Roma chanced to have in his haversack.

The question of food became now a most important one.

Pedro, however, was not much alarmed on that score, for he observed plenty of game, and he had no doubt that he should be able to supply the wants of the party.

The following morning Pedro was early astir, and having secured some fine fish in an adjacent stream, he roasted them upon stones heated in a fire of dead boughs, and his young friends who ate quite heartily pronounced them delicious.

They wandered about all day.

The next and the next.

For nearly a week the fugitives had been lost in the forest.

Not a human being had as yet crossed their path.

Not a single native had they seen.

This was most remarkable.

Pedro could only account for this fact upon the supposition that he was within one of the sacred forests, which the natives believe to be the abode of evil spirits, and where nothing could induce them to enter.

One day, a little after the sun had passed the meridian, the sky was suddenly overcast by inky clouds.

"There's a tornado coming!" cried Pedro.

Both Leon and Isabel involuntarily crossed themselves devoutly.

They knew that the terrible tornado meant death and destruction. They knew that nothing could stand before the storm king's onset, that trees that had stood for ages would be torn up by the roots; that the forest would be devastated, and that their own lives were in deadly peril!

"What shall we do? Where seek shelter?" cried Isabel wildly, clasping her little hands in fear.

Leon and Pedro looked anxiously about them.

They had just entered a tract of country where the forest was open, and in advance of them they saw an open plan strewn with scoria, solidified lava, and the miscellaneous debris occasioned by volcanic eruptions.

"To the plains! to the plains!" cried Pedro; "there, at least, we shall be free from falling trees."

Pedro grasped one of Isabel's hands, while Leon took the other, and then, half carrying the maiden, they traversed the short space which intervened between them and the open, desolate plain at a very rapid pace.

They reached the plain.

Already they could hear the roar of the tempest coming from the southward.

The eyes of Pedro and Leon roved everywhere, seeking for some cleft, some cavern or opening, in which they could find refuge.

The sound of trees falling, with rapid, crashing noise, told that the tornado was carrying everything before it.

They must find shelter, or, in a few moments, their doom would be sealed.

Suddenly Pedro uttered a cry of joy.

"Look! look! yonder is a pit in the plain; let us hasten to it!" he cried.

They ran to the opening which Pedro had discovered.

The solidified lava had been split at the point, and

there was a fissure in the plain, perhaps three feet broad and four feet deep.

Our friends sprang into it, and threw themselves upon the ground.

None too soon was this accomplished.

Scarcely had they done so, when the tornado passed over them with a terrific roar, and a dense cloud of dust was swept up from the lava beds and hurled upon them.

Blinded for the time, and half suffocated, our friends remained in the fissure until the storm was passed.

Pedro had been silently counting the moments, and he estimated that the storm had not been more than fifteen minutes in passing.

Storms of this character are common in Central America.

When the cyclone had spent its fury, and our adventurers once more deemed it prudent to venture from the sheltering depths of the fissure, they regained the plain.

Upon every hand the tornado had left behind the evidence of its brief but violent attack.

In the forest through which they had come, every tree in the track of the hurricane had been flattened to the ground.

The desolate lava plain was strewn with the broken branches of forest monarchs.

"Thanks be to the Blessed Virgin for our escape!" murmured Isabel.

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed Pedro.

They all listened in silence for a moment.

Soon they distinctly heard a moaning sound, which seemed to proceed from the forest.

"It is the voice of some human creature," said Leon.

The groans of some person in distress now became more distinct.

"Help! help!" cried a faint voice.

"Some one has been overtaken in the forest by the cyclone. Let us go to his assistance," said Leon.

"We will do so," assented Pedro, and he led the way toward the point from whence the sound came.

Leon and Isabel followed.

Soon they came upon an aged native, who lay beneath the trunk of a fallen tree.

The tree had fallen in such a manner that while the native under it had not been crushed, he was yet by its weight held close against the earth in a cramped, painful, and immovable position.

The united efforts of Pedro and Leon were exerted upon the weight which compressed the fallen man, and after several ineffectual attempts they succeeded in releasing him.

The rescued man regained his feet, and our friends observed that he was attired in the garb of a native priest.

"Thanks to the white people for saving my unworthy life," said the aged man in the language of the Incas, with which long intercourse with the natives had rendered our friends conversant. "I am Halualala, the priest of the Incas. The secret city of my tribe is near at hand, and although the foot of one of the white race has never entered within its gates, if my white saviors will accompany me hither, they shall find hospitality and a guide to direct them upon their journey when they see fit to depart."

CHAPTER V.

LEON, PEDRO AND ISABEL IN THE SECRET CITY OF THE INCAS—DOOMED.

"We are lost in the forest," said Pedro. "We had set out to make our way to the Spanish settlement of San de Cappello, and if you, good man, can provide us with a trusty guide who can direct us upon our way, we will gladly go with you to the secret city of the Incas, of which you speak."

"Most truly have I spoken," answered Halualala. "A trusty guide shall be placed at your disposal after you have rested for a short time within our city."

"Are you sure that the people of your city will prove friendly to us? I have heard that the Incas look not with favor upon the people of our race," said Leon.

"Fear not. The best that our city affords will be placed at your disposal, and my people will delight to do you honor. They are friendly to the white race at all times, and when they know that you have saved the life of Halualala, the esteemed priest of the mountain temple, they will be doubly friendly toward you," answered Halualala.

"Then lead on, good man, and we will follow you," answered Leon.

"Before proceeding, according to our laws, you must promise me never to reveal to any of your race the location of the secret city. Will you do this?" asked the priest of the Incas.

"We promise, and you can rely upon our good faith," said Leon, answering for all.

The priest of the Incas led the way across the desolate plain toward the mountains, behind which the secret city of the Incas, which we have described in the second chapter of our story, was hidden.

Little did the well-meaning priest dream that he was leading the people who had saved his life into the very jaws of death; for, as the reader knows, when Halualala left the secret city to journey to the land of the Aztecs, the plague had not made its appearance, and the fearful edict condemning the first white man and woman who should fall into the power of the tribe to the sacrifice had not been promulgated.

Our friends, though they knew it not, were about to venture within a city from whence they would never be permitted to go forth alive.

Could some good angel have only whispered a word of warning in their ears, they might have been spared the terrors of the dreadful "Steps of Doom," whose victims the Incas would seek to make them.

Rejoicing at their good fortune in falling in with one who could provide them with a guide to San de Cappello, and hoping soon to reach their friends at that settlement of the Spaniards, our friends pursued their way in a frame of mind more satisfactory than any they had experienced since their flight from the bougos of the renegade.

The mysterious mountains before the secret city were soon reached.

Halualala was, of course, familiar with the secret pass through the volcanic range, by means of which alone could the secret city be reached.

Through wild defiles, along the edges of yawning chasms, where a single misstep would hurl them into a dark abyss, underneath hanging rocks, which seemed about to fall upon them, by the edge of the smoking crater of the volcano, and through gloomy tunnels the Inca priest guided our friends.

The mountain range was passed in safety.

The secret city of the Incas was disclosed.

The three white people, under the guidance of Halualala, descended toward it.

They could not restrain giving expression in words to the surprise and admiration which the sights around them occasioned.

"Wonderful! wonderful!" said Leon; "it is like some fable of fairyland, is it not, sister?"

"It is most beautiful. Who would believe that such a delightful valley and such a lovely city could be found in the midst of this wild land?" Isabel answered.

"Look here," said Pedro, calling his companions' attention to the strangely sculptured and painted rocks upon the side of the mountain which they were descending.

They all examined the work of the Incas, traces of which are still to be found in Nicaragua.

Suddenly, as they turned an abrupt angle in the way, they came upon a hideous stone idol.

"What a horrible thing!" exclaimed Isabel.

"It is one of the symbols of our faith," answered Halualala, solemnly.

Our friends made no further comment, for they did not wish to offend the Inca.

Soon they arrived at a massive stone building set in the mountainside, and which resembled a mosque in its architectural design.

"This is the mountain temple over which I preside," said Halualala.

As the Inca priest spoke, a number of natives came out of the temples.

At sight of Halualala and the white persons who accompanied him, they seemed to become almost frantic with joy. They embraced the good priest, and then set off upon a run toward the city, shouting, "We are saved from the plague! We are saved from the plague, for Halualala has come with the white man and woman!"

The mountain priest seemed at a loss to account for the peculiar conduct of his people, but as none of them remained to offer any explanation, he hurried his white friends onward to the city.

The people who had reached the city in advance of our friends had spread the news of their arrival, and by the time they entered the grand plaza in which stood the massive altar of "The Steps of Doom," the vast square was thronged with the populace, all eager to set eyes upon the white people, who were a great curiosity to many of them.

The multitude shouted joyfully, and presently the Inca king, Montemora, appeared and gave orders that the white strangers should be conducted into a palace near at hand, and their every want supplied.

Halualala saw his friends installed in a sumptuously appointed suite of apartments, and then, in obedience to an order from the king, he repaired to the royal palace and was granted an audience with the monarch of the secret city.

"Whence come the white strangers?" asked the king.

"From the forest beyond the mountains," answered Halualala.

"How came you to bring them here?" was the next question.

The priest of the mountains related how his life had been saved, and how the whites had entered the city upon his promise of friendly treatment, and for the purpose of procuring a guide to conduct them to the white settlement of San de Cappello.

When the narrative was concluded, the king said:

"Wise and good Halualala, you have done a deed which will bring upon you the gratitude of all our people and of your sovereign. Know you that during your absence a dreadful plague has come upon our city, and our people are dying by the hundreds each day?"

"You have given me the first intimation of the calamity which I have received. But I do not understand why you should rejoice so much at my arrival with my white friends," replied Halualala.

"I will explain all to you, and then you will understand why there is such wild rejoicing among our people at the

presence in our city of the white people at this time," said the king.

The priest of the mountain bowed deferentially.

"Know thee," the king continued, "that it has been revealed unto Zoda, the high priest of the sacrifice and guardian of "The Steps of Doom," in a vision of prophetic value, that when two human beings of the white race, one of whom must be a man and the other a woman, are offered as a sacrifice to our gods upon the altar of 'The Steps of Doom,' then the plague will cease.

"It was deemed impossible to procure the victims for the 'Steps of Doom,' but you have accomplished the miracle. Two of the whites who have entered our city shall be sacrificed upon the altar of 'The Steps of Doom'—the woman and one of her male companions shall be the victims."

As the king concluded, and the terrible truth that he had betrayed to death the kind people who had saved his own life dawned upon him, he fell upon his face before the king in an agony of remorse and grief.

"Oh, king, I implore you, spare these innocent white people! They saved my life, and it is too horrible to think that in return I have repaid their kindness by leading them to a dreadful death.

"In the name of all our gods! O king, let not the whites be sacrificed. Spare them from 'The Steps of Doom.' If my life can be given for them, let me ascend the fatal steps and give my life for their salvation!"

Thus wildly and earnestly did Halualala plead for the lives of his white friends.

Idolater though he was, the priest of the mountain temple was a just man according to his light, and when he offered his own life to save that of the whites, whom he had unwittingly betrayed, he was in deadly earnest.

"I cannot grant your prayer," answered the king coldly. "The edict has gone forth. Montemora, the king of the Incas, is not a weathercock to change with every passing breeze. The lives of two persons, not of our race, may save thousands of our people, and it is fitting they should die. Know you not that your prince and future king, my only son, the brave and noble Lesandlas, is ill of the plague and his life depends upon the success of the sacrifice of these white people?" The king paused, and then bending low, he whispered in a voice intended only for the ears of the priest: "There are those in our city who would seize upon the death of the young prince to rebel against my authority and establish a new dynasty; for there is plotting among our people to this end, my spies inform me."

Halualala saw that it were vain to further supplicate.

With a heavy heart he went forth from the king's presence.

"Be not cast down," said the king, as the priest with dejected mien withdrew. "You are innocent in this matter, for you were ignorant of what had occurred during your absence. The whites cannot blame you, for you believed you were acting for their good in conducting them to our city."

This was true, but it afforded the priest of the Incas but little consolation.

Halualala knew not how he should break the terrible news of the awful truth that they were condemned to ascend the fatal "Steps of Doom" to his white friends.

That the three whites must soon learn the truth the priest well knew, for his judgment assured him that now that the king had decided their fate it would not be long before they would be called upon the ascend "The Steps of Doom."

Halualala directed his steps toward the palace which had been designated by the king as the place of entertainment for the white strangers.

As he approached the building, the priest observed that it was guarded upon every side by the native troop of soldiers known as the guard of the doomed, who were always employed to prevent the escape of human beings who had been sentenced to ascend "The Steps of Doom."

Halualala was revolving in his mind some plan by means of which to rescue the whites from the dreadful fate of "The Steps of Doom." As he saw that the palace was guarded by the death watch, he muttered:

"Too late! They are already prisoners. I am powerless to aid them. 'The Steps of Doom' will lead them to death. Woe has come upon me!"

CHAPTER VI.

OUR FRIENDS LEARN THE WORST—PEDRO'S MISSION.

Meanwhile, our white friends were in blissful ignorance of the peril which menaced them so threateningly.

Instead of feeling the slightest uneasiness or fear, the three whites felt perfectly secure.

From the moment of their arrival within the limits of the secret city, they had been treated only with kindness and respect.

It was the custom to thus treat those who were doomed for the sacrifice.

When a human being was set apart for the propitiation of the gods of the Incas, he became at once in their eyes invested with a sacred quality, which they supposed to surround everything pertaining to their gods.

The prisoners would not be ill-treated.

They were supplied with food, and with everything necessary to their comfort.

"This is like fairyland," said Leon. "What say you,

Pedro, let us take a walk about the city, while our friend Halualala is absent?"

"I am willing." They had eaten and rested.

They were fated, however, to look upon none of the novel sights of the city that day.

Just as they were about to pass through the door leading to the street two members of the guard, who were stationed there, crossed their spears before them.

Lon and Pedro were in advance; Isabel was just behind them.

"You cannot leave the palace," said one of the guards.

"What?" demanded Pedro in surprise.

"You are prisoners," answered the Inca.

"Prisoners? Surely you are wrong. We are the guests of your good priest, Halualala," said Leon.

"You are white. You are to propitiate our gods and rid us of the plague which is raging in our city," continued the guard.

"Propitiate your gods? I do not understand you. How can we influence your deities?"

"I can make you no wiser, for I have received no orders. Here comes one who may enlighten you further," said the guard, as, at that moment, Halualala appeared before the palace, having just come from his audience with the ruler of his race.

"What means this?" demanded Leon. "This man"—indicating the death guard—"tells us that we are prisoners, and will not permit us to pass. Please explain to him the error which he has no doubt unwittingly made."

"Alas, I cannot do so," answered Halualala.

"What?"

"I cannot explain to the guard that you are not prisoners."

"Then have you, who owe us your life, betrayed us into danger?" asked Leon.

"I have not betrayed you willingly. If you have come into danger, it was by reason of my own ignorance. But come, retire with me back into your apartments, for I have much to say to you."

Filled with nameless fears and disturbing apprehensions, the whites returned with the priest of the mountain temple to the interior of the palace which had become to them a prison.

"Listen to me attentively, and you shall know what I swear by all the gods of the Incas has only within the hour been made known to me," said Halualala.

Our friends were silent.

A dread foreboding had come upon them all.

A sense of impending calamity, nameless and undefined, yet oppressive and awing, rendered them attentive and speechless listeners.

Halualala thereupon went on to fully explain the situation of terrible peril in which the three whites were placed.

There was an air of truth about all his statements which convinced our friends of his sincerity.

In conclusion, the Inca priest said:

"I would freely give my life to save you, and had I known that you would have been in danger in our city, I would never have brought you here. On the contrary, I should have warned you of the danger."

"I believe you, Halualala, but it is too late now to mourn over what has been done. Let us think only of escape. Surely you can aid us to escape?" said Leon.

Isabel was so overcome by the announcement of the peril that threatened them, that white and trembling, she clung to her brother as though she feared each moment that the Incas would come to drag her up the dreadful "Steps of Doom" to the sacrifice.

"From the moment when I learned that you could only be saved by secretly flying from the city, I have been striving to think of some plan by means of which the desired result may be attained," said Halualala.

"And have you thought of anything practicable?" asked Leon eagerly.

"Not as yet," replied the priest mournfully. "You will be guarded night and day with the most watchful care, until the hour comes for you to ascend 'The Steps of Doom.'"

"You say your king's son is ill?" suddenly queried Pedro, who had been silent up to this moment.

"I did," answered the priest.

"And your doctors have given him up to die?"

"Yes; they say that his life can only be saved by the sacrifice according to the vision of Zoda, of which I told you."

"I wish I could see this afflicted prince. I have an idea I could cure him," said Pedro.

"What! Are you then skilled in medicine?"

"Somewhat, and I fancy I understand the nature of the plague which is raging here."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"If you could save the life of the king's son, perhaps you could make a bargain with the king."

"That is my idea, Halualala. Gain for me an interview with your king. I have a proposition to make him," said Pedro.

"What do you intend to propose to him?" Leon inquired.

"I shall say to the king: If you give me your promise that myself and my two friends shall go forth from your city with the promise of safe conduct to the settlement of San de Cappello, I will cure your son."

"Can you do this, think you, Pedro?" asked Isabel.

"If the malady which affects the prince is what I pre-

sume it to be, I can cure him," replied Pedro confidently.

"Then I will go at once, and I think I can promise that the king will see you," said Halualala.

"Make haste, then."

"I will use all speed."

"We shall be in an agony of suspense until the result of Pedro's interview with the king is known," said Isabel.

The priest of the Incas departed at once to seek the king.

He was absent a long time.

"I was successful," announced the priest. "The king will grant you an audience immediately. The royal guards are now at the door awaiting to conduct you into the presence of the king."

"I am ready to go," said Pedro, and embracing his young master and mistress, he hastened from their presence.

"Heaven prosper your mission!" said Isabel.

Pedro was at once marched between a file of guards to the royal palace.

Into the audience-room of the native potentate was he conducted.

Pedro bowed low before the king.

"Make known your wishes," said the king, not unkindly.

"The words I would speak are for your ears alone," answered Pedro earnestly.

The king waved the guards away and in a moment he was alone with the white stranger.

"Proceed with the object for which you have come," said the king.

"I will do so. Your son is at the point of death, is he not?" said Pedro.

"You speak truly. Is it of him you have aught to say?" asked the king, immediately manifesting new interest.

"It is. I am a physician learned in all the lore of roots and herbs, and the mineral remedies known only to the white race. I believe that my knowledge is such that I can restore your son to health, and I will do so, if you will promise me that myself and two white companions shall go forth from your city uninjured, and be conducted in safety to the settlement of my people at San de Cappello."

Thus spake Pedro, with an assumption of dignity and confidence in his skill which was not lost upon the dusky monarch.

"Cure my son," answered the king, "and you shall go forth from my city unharmed and laden with all the gold and precious gems which you can carry with you. But the other two whites, the man and the woman, must ascend 'The Steps of Doom.' The edict has gone forth, and were I to spare them my people would rebel against me, and I cannot save your friends if I would now. My people believe that the sacrifice of the white man and woman will end the ravages of the plague."

When the king had concluded his remarks, Pedro drew himself up with dignity.

"Then you refuse to save your son's life. I will not exert my skill in his behalf except upon the terms which I have mentioned. I care not for myself. I will remain in your city, and you can do with me as you will when I have cured your son, if you will only let my companions depart unharmed. Surely the sacrifice of one white person will suffice," said the noble and devoted old servitor.

The king was silent, and Pedro could see that he was thinking deeply. Finally he said:

"To-morrow, at sunrise, it has been decided that your two companions ascend the 'Steps of Doom' leading to the summit of the altar, there to be offered up as a sacrifice, but I will promise you that if you will begin to exercise your skill upon my son, their execution shall be delayed until three days have passed. This is my ultimatum. What say you?"

CHAPTER VII.

PEDRO AS A PHYSICIAN—THE DAY OF DOOM.

Pedro remained silent for some moments.

The faithful fellow saw that nothing which he could promise would suffice to influence the Inca king to grant his prayer.

Pedro reflected, and he came to the conclusion that even the prospect of staying the fate of his companions for three days was not to be lightly thrown aside.

Three days—many things might transpire in that time.

The noble-hearted old servitor allowed his thoughts to become filled with imaginary hopes.

Three days might afford the priest of the mountain temple, Halualala, time to perfect, and, indeed, to execute some scheme which might work to the advantage of Leon and Isabel.

"None knoweth what a single day may bring forth. Who can foretell the occurrences of a single hour that has not yet come? What mortal can divine the events of a single moment that has yet to be born?" Thus thought Pedro Roma.

"Well, what answer make you?" finally demanded the king, becoming in a degree impatient at the prolonged and wearisome silence of the old Spaniard.

Pedro brought back his wandering thoughts. He focused his mental powers upon the dire and imminent realities of the awful present. He realized that it was within the range or scope of his power, at least, to prolong the lives

of his beloved young master and mistress for three whole days—seventy-two hours.

Was it not his duty to acquiesce in the proposition of the Inca king?

Pedro asked himself the question.

There was but one answer.

Pedro determined to yield to the terms proposed by the Inca monarch.

"I will commence my treatment of your son at once if you will promise that the lives of my two white companions shall be spared for three days," Pedro finally made answer.

"It is well," the Inca king made answer.

Immediately he clapped his hands.

In answer to the signal the royal guard reappeared.

"Conduct this man of the white race to the chamber of my son, Prince Lesandlas," ordered the king.

The guards bowed low, and immediately Pedro was hurried from the royal presence.

Through long and spacious corridors was Pedro hurried, and at last his conductors ushered him into a most luxuriantly and elegantly furnished alcove room.

Upon a curtained couch reclined the young Prince Lesandlas.

The heir to the throne of the ancient Incas was a handsome youth, and his somewhat emaciated features at once favorably impressed the old Spaniard.

Pedro proceeded after the manner of the disciples of Esculapius the world over, and after concluding his preliminary examination of his royal patient he proceeded to open his knapsack.

The young prince and his attendants watched the white "medicine maker" with unfeigned curiosity, as he proceeded from the depths of his knapsack to produce sundry packages of roots and herbs whose medicinal virtue were known only to himself.

The examination which Pedro had made of the young prince convinced him that he was correct in his surmises regarding the nature of his malady, and he was now confident that he could restore him to health.

Pedro prepared some of the herbs.

The old Spaniard made a strong tea.

Before leaving the prince, he saw him drink some of this decoction, and fall into a gentle and natural slumber.

When this was done Pedro withdrew, well satisfied with the result.

The old Spaniard was at once conducted back to the place in which Leon and Isabel were confined.

The young people, who had most anxiously awaited the return of their old servitor, listened breathlessly to his narrative of his experience in the king's palace.

"Three days are left us. You must escape before they pass, or you are lost," said Pedro.

But how was this desired ultimatum to be accomplished?

None of our friends could answer.

At this moment Halualala entered the room.

He was quickly made acquainted with all that had occurred.

"There is but one course of procedure that I can suggest," he said. "It is the belief of our people that none save the guardian of 'The Steps of Doom,' Zoda, and the sacred axe bearer, who carries the sanctified weapon with which to behead the victims of the sacrifice, can ascend 'The Steps of Doom' and live. When you and your sister are led forth to the sacrifice, my young white friend, I will be near at hand, and I will, by virtue of my high office, be allowed to attend to binding your arms; your feet will be left at liberty, that you may be able to walk up 'The Steps of Doom.' I will so arrange the adjustment of the cords which are supposed to bind your hands that a sudden and vigorous wrench will free them. When you have in this way liberated yourself you must kill Zoda and the axe bearer, and then rush up 'The Steps of Doom.' Once you have gained the summit of the altar, no one will dare to follow."

"But how shall I be able to dispatch Zoda and the axe bearer? Whence shall the weapon come?" asked Leon.

"I will conceal it in your girdle when I am binding you. I should have said as much at first," answered Halualala.

"But when we have reached the top of the altar, supposing all to have gone well, as we have planned, how can we escape from thence? The moment we descend we shall be seized again. I cannot see how your scheme will profit us in the end," said Leon.

"Know you, young son of the white race, that I am one skilled in the occult mysteries of the earth and of the air? Know you that I read the signs of the planets in the heavens; that the stars speak to me, and that the mountains that vomit forth smoke and molten lava are ruled by the astronomical variations of the zodiac, which influences all earthly things?" said Halualala, impressively.

"I confess that I am ignorant of all this," answered Leon wonderingly.

"Nevertheless, 'tis even so. Do as I have bidden you, and kill Zoda, and the axe bearer, and trust to the prophecy of Halualala, the high priest of the mountain temple, for I say once and for all it shall then be well with you. Since I saw you last I have cast the mystic horoscope of the heavens and I foretell that the last days of the secret city of my people have come!

"The hour of doom which my forefathers, who, in former days, presided over the mountain temple, predicted would come upon our city in the present cycle, is at hand."

"But how? I do not comprehend you?" queried Leon, much impressed by the strange and mysterious words of the priest of the Incas.

"Seek not to penetrate the revelations which have been made known to me. Act only as I have directed you, and you shall be saved. My heart was heavy, and I was oppressed lest you should deem that I had proven ungrateful, but now my heart is light, for I can trust in what science has revealed to me.

"The demon of unrest is about to descend into the mountains, and the result will be the most terrible, but your salvation it shall be," answered Halualala solemnly.

With these words, Halualala left the prison of those who were doomed to ascend the fatal "Steps of Doom."

Left alone, our friends conversed together most earnestly.

Pedro was fain to trust implicitly in the advice of the Inca priest.

As it was the only shadow at which Leon could grasp in the appalling gloom of doubt and despair which surrounded him and his sister, he, too, determined that when the terrible time came when he and Isabel were to be led forth to the "Steps of Doom," he would act precisely as the priest of the mountain temple had bidden him to do.

Next day, Pedro again visited the prince, and to the intense satisfaction of the Spaniard he found his patient much improved.

The most alarming symptoms had disappeared.

The consuming fever which had been burning the very vitals of the king's son, had, to a considerable degree, subsided, and Pedro was more confident than ever that a complete and permanent cure would be the ultimate result of his ministrations.

The king was delighted, and when Pedro was leaving the royal palace, at the conclusion of this, his second visit to his royal patient, Montemora presented the aged Spanish "medico" with a bag of gold dust, worth many ducats.

The next day Prince Lesandlas was so much improved that he could leave his couch and walk about his room.

As may be supposed, the success of the "white medico" aroused the jealousy and hatred of the Inca doctors, and as Pedro was passing through one of the long passages leading from the room of the prince to the main entrance of the palace, at the conclusion of this, his third visit to the prince, two natives suddenly rushed upon him with drawn daggers.

They were assassins hired by the jealous doctors. Pedro shouted for assistance, and leaping quickly into a corner, he whipped out his long two-edged Damascus blade, and awaited the onset of the hired murderers.

Pedro was not lacking in skill as a swordsman, and although the two Incas who had assailed him struck viciously at his breast, he parried their blows, and in return passed his blade through the body of his foremost assailant.

The uninjured assassin turned and fled just as a company of the royal guards came thronging into the hall in answer to Pedro's cry for assistance.

The king was at once apprised of what had occurred, and he detailed a detachment of the palace guards to escort Pedro to the palace of the victims designed for the sacrifice.

The following morning dawned bright and beautiful.

This was the day which had been appointed for the sacrifice of Leon and Isabel upon the terrible altar of "The Steps of Doom."

The crisis had come.

CHAPTER VIII.

PEDRO'S PLAN FAILS—THE EXECUTIONER AT THE PALACE DOOR.

The hour at which Leon and Isabel were to be led forth to "The Steps of Doom" had been fixed for ten in the morning.

This would give ample time for the populace to assemble in the grand plaza around the temple and altar of "The Steps of Doom."

Although the sky was cloudless and not a fleck of condensed moisture obscured the blue vault of heaven's high

arch, still a sulphurous smoke overhung the city, and it was not without some feelings of vague apprehension that the more wise and thoughtful inhabitants viewed the neighboring volcanic mountains which appeared to be in a state of unusual activity.

For years the hidden fires of these mighty volcanoes had slumbered, or at worst but slight ebullitions had disturbed their serenity, and yet, although the masses of the populace of the secret city had been lulled into a sense of security by this passivity and quietude, there were those who still feared that some day there would be a terrible volcanic eruption, such as, according to ancient legends which had been handed down from father to son among the wise men of the tribe, once devastated that vast tract of country now covered with scoria and volcanic debris upon the opposite side of the mountain.

Early upon the fateful morn Pedro visited the young prince, Lesandlas.

With him went Isabel Gonzales.

Pedro had hit upon a plan for her salvation which he deemed well worth a trial.

The old Spaniard had not explained its nature to the maiden or her brother, and he had not taken the Inca priest of the mountain temple into his confidence, either.

Pedro had obtained Montemora's consent for Isabel to make this visit to the now convalescent prince, but it was not without the attendance of a strong guard that the young girl doomed to the sacrifice was permitted to leave the palace of those fated to mount "The Steps of Doom."

At sight of the lovely Spanish girl, who was a perfect type of the beauty of her race, cast in feminine mould, the prince of the Incas was spellbound.

The ravishing beauty of the young Spanish maiden enthralled him. Her deep, dark eyes were an unknown sea upon which the heart of the young scion of royalty was lost forever.

Never had such fascinating beauty been brought within the range of Lesandlas' vision, never before had his heart awakened to that delightful dream of bliss which one woman some time or other awakens in the heart of most men.

The young prince of the Incas was enthralled, was captivated, led into bondage by the power of love.

Pedro, the wise and cunning, had counted upon all this.

The old Spanish servitor hoped to make Isabel's beauty save her life.

In this case her face was to be her fortune, according to the calculations of good Pedro Roma.

Satisfied that Isabel's beauty had made the desired impression, Pedro saw her depart for the prison, where her brother awaited her. She was attended by the guards who had escorted her to the king's palace.

When Isabel was gone, the young prince broke out in rapturous praises of her beauty, as is the fashion of enamored youth among more civilized races.

"By my faith," cried he, "such loveliness was never seen! She must not meet death upon the altar of 'The Steps of Doom.' I would preserve her, I would save her; for it would be happiness most supreme to make her my wife, my princess. I will see my father, the king; I will intercede to save her, I will implore him to spare her!"

Thus the young prince spake, and his words assured the old servitor that the hope with which he had brought Isabel into his presence was realized.

"If you would save the life of the maiden delay not a moment, for within two hours she is to be dragged to the sacrifice upon the altar of 'The Steps of Doom,'" said Pedro.

"I will not needlessly delay," answered Prince Lesandlas.

"Do not; for every moment counts."

"True."

"And I predict that if you change the fate of the radiant maiden who has enthralled your fancy, you will be obliged to consume some precious time in arguing the case with your stern and relentless sire."

"My father can refuse me nothing," was the confident answer of the young prince.

Pedro shook his gray head somewhat doubtfully.

Lesandlas clapped his hands thrice.

Immediately an attendant entered.

"Seek my father in the royal reception hall, and say to him that Lesandlas would speak with him upon the instant. Away, and tarry not," ordered the prince.

With a profound salaam the attendant withdrew.

Soon the Inca king entered the chamber of his beloved son.

Pedro made a movement to withdraw.

"Stay," said Lesandlas. "I would, mayhap, fain call upon you to help me plead my cause. My father"—turning to the king—"you have in other days ofttimes urged me to choose a wife from among the fair ones of our race, but none have pleased my eyes, none have delighted my

senses. To-day, the white maiden, who is doomed to be offered as a sacrifice to our gods upon the altar of 'The Steps of Doom' visited me with the good white medico.

"She is fair as the fairest flower of Nicaragua; she is as lovely as the placid lakelet, as radiant as the stars. In short, my father, the heart of Lesandlas is touched. I love the white maiden, and I implore you to spare her from the sacrifice for my sake, for I would fain make her my wife."

Thus spoke Lesandlas, and eloquently did he plead.

Love inspired his words.

Montemora, the Inca potentate, was dumb.

Surprise was expressed upon his countenance, astonishment and wonder were depicted there.

"Speak, my father, and rejoice the heart of your son!" urged the young prince.

A struggle seemed to be taking place in the king's heart. Affection for his son and fear of the consequences that would be the result of granting the prayer of the prince were at war.

Breathlessly, Pedro Roma watched and listened.

The faithful old servitor had played his last card.

If the king refused his son's prayer, Leon and Isabel were doomed to death beyond the shadow of a human hope.

It was an exciting moment, a moment fraught with awful interest. Two human lives hung upon the decision of the Inca king.

Pedro was devout according to the teachings of his faith, and he silently implored all the saints to grant success to his scheme.

At last the king seemed to have arrived at a decision, and as Pedro noticed the royal countenance become stern and set with the lines betokening fixed resolve, his heart sank.

"My son," said the king, speaking slowly and firmly, "it may not be. I would grant you any other prayer, but state policy and justice to my subjects as well as to myself forbid my interposing to save the life of the white maiden, even for your sake.

"Nothing can move me, and to save myself, and you, as well, from useless emotion which might be most injurious to you in your weak and debilitated state, I will leave you."

Without pausing to hear another word from his son, the king strode hastily from the room.

With a groan the young prince buried his face in his hands, and Pedro knew that he was giving way to bitter disappointment.

Silently the old Spaniard left the room.

In the street he was accosted by Halualala.

"I would speak with you a moment," said the priest.

"Curses upon your head, and upon the heads of all the heathen within this city of fiends! By all the saints! I'll stab some of you before you slay my young master and the innocent girl, his sister!" cried Pedro, savagely.

The old servitor was mad for the moment with disappointment and despair.

"Come, come, good sir; I would speak for the good of those for whose safety you are anxious," answered the priest of the mountain temple calmly.

"What would you say?"

"See you yonder mountains?"

"I am not blind!"

"Before the sun hath reached the middle of the arch above us, that mountain will not be as it is now. When the mountain speaks your friends will have a chance for life!"

"What can the heathen mean?" muttered Pedro Roma as he continued his way toward the palace in which Leon and Isabel were imprisoned.

"When the mountain speaks! bah! He speaks in riddles; I distrust him; I distrust them all!" thus murmuring, Pedro reached the palace.

The guards of "The Steps of Doom" were drawn up before the door, and Zoda, the high priest of the sacrifice, and the sacred executioner of the doomed, clothed in scarlet, and bearing upon his shoulder the sacred axe, were just about to enter to drag forth the white prisoners.

Pedro drew his sword; he was desperate; a sort of insanity of despair had come upon him, and he was rushing at the high priest intent upon taking his life, when he was seized by half a dozen of the guards and held back.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE IDOL—THE MEMORIES OF THE PAST.

Zoda and the altar executioner disappeared within the palace while yet Pedro Roma struggled with the Inca guards at the door.

It was known throughout the city that Pedro, or the "white medico," had restored the young Prince Lesandlas to health, and the king had ordered that no harm should come to him.

It was for the above reason that no injury was inflicted upon the now utterly reckless Roma.

The guards merely disarmed him, and he was warned that his violent conduct must be discontinued, or he would be placed in confinement.

Pedro soon recovered his self-control. With the most harrowing feelings he awaited the reappearance of Zoda and his white friends.

An unaccountably long time passed, and yet the priest of the sacrifice and his victims did not come out of the palace.

A murmur of impatience ran through the assembled multitude.

All the vast concourse of natives wondered at the delay.

It was evident that some unexpected or unforeseen incident had occurred to gain for the doomed ones this respite.

Roma would have given much had the walls of the palace been rendered transparent at that moment that he might have seen what was transpiring within the building.

The old servitor dared not hope that the delay would be long continued.

Suddenly Zoda appeared at the door of the palace and in another moment a howl of disappointment went up from the thronged plaza.

The whites doomed to be sacrificed upon the altar had disappeared.

Zoda hurriedly made this announcement; and then, giving some order which Roma did not hear, he rushed within the palace again, closely followed by a company of guards.

"Thanks be to the saints!" cried Roma. "Can it be that Halualala, the priest of the mountain temple, has, after all, found a way to save them? Has he led them from the city?" Thus ran Roma's thoughts; but at that moment some one tapped him upon the shoulder, and turning quickly around he found himself face to face with Halualala himself.

"Zoda announces that my white companions have disappeared from the palace. Know you aught of this?" asked Roma in a whisper, that other ears than those for which the query was intended might not catch its import.

"No, I know nothing, nor can I scarcely credit your statement. It does not seem to me possible that the white prisoners could have left the palace, surrounded as it has constantly been by a strong guard," answered Halualala.

"But they have disappeared!" reiterated Roma.

At this moment a shout went up from the throng about the palace door.

This outcry was one of satisfaction. It was indeed a yell of triumph.

Roma so understood it.

Let us see what had really occurred within the palace after Roma had left with Isabel to visit the prince, as we have narrated.

Left alone, Leon paced up and down the three communicating rooms in which the white prisoners were confined.

For the hundredth time he closely inspected every nook. He sounded the walls, he sought diligently for some secret outlet from the place, but his quest was fruitless for a time.

At last he paused before a grim idol which occupied a niche in the wall.

Carelessly Leon rested his hand upon the head of the idol and leaned heavily.

To his surprise the hideous symbol of an Inca deity sank down slowly until behind it an opening in the wall large enough to admit of the passage of a man was exposed.

The young Spaniard uttered an exclamation.

At this moment the door of his prison opened.

Leon sprang away from the idol, and the instant his weight was removed from it the huge image shot noiselessly up to its original position.

"If I have discovered a way of escape, the guard has also caught the secret," thought Leon, turning toward the door, expecting to see one of the Incas.

"Isabel!" he exclaimed joyfully, for the person who had just entered the room was his sister, who had just returned from her visit to the young Inca prince, Lesandlas.

"Oh, sister, I have made a great discovery—see here!" cried Leon, and springing to the side of the idol, he threw his weight upon it, and in a moment the opening was again exposed.

Isabel gave a cry of joy.

"May not this secret opening lead us from the palace?" she said.

"We will hope for the best. Come, sister, we will explore it," answered Leon.

He assisted her to pass through the opening.

Still keeping his hand upon the idol to hold it down, he crept through the opening.

The moment he was within the dark passage upon which the hidden door opened, the pressure of his weight was removed from the idol, and it resumed its original position.

Leon took Isabel's hand.

They groped about in the darkness, which was impenetrable.

Soon they discovered that the place in which they had ventured was not a secret passage. On the contrary, it was but a narrow room, and they were as much in prison now as they were before they entered the hidden apartment.

Having satisfied themselves that there was no outlet, they calmly awaited further developments.

Leon stole back to the point where the smooth, polished back of the idol walled in the opening through which he had come, and he now made the discovery that from the inside the idol could not be compressed—could not be moved from its position.

Then he learned that he was powerless to leave the hidden room, even by the way which he had come.

As Leon made this discovery, Isabel gave utterance to an exclamation.

The girl had stumbled over a mass of human bones.

Although, as we have said, it was so dark that nothing could be seen, the sense of touch satisfied Leon that the bones were the remnants of several human skeletons.

The young people experienced a feeling of awe. Perhaps the place into which they had ventured was a burial vault.

Perhaps it was to be their fate to perish here of famine. As they thought of this they experienced no increased fears; for such a death might not be as swift, but it did not then seem as terrible as the doom for which the Incas had reserved them.

Our friends had not long been within the hidden room when the faint sounds of voices and of footfalls in the room which they had left became audible.

Leon and Isabel correctly supposed that their captors had come to drag them to the sacrifice. What was the astonishment of Zoda and his followers when they discovered the apartments occupied by the white prisoners were deserted.

Zoda could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes.

Zoda and the executioner searched everywhere.

No trace of the missing ones could be found.

"What could have become of them?" This self-asked question Zoda could not answer.

It was evident that the priest of the sacrifice knew not the secret of the movable idol, and it was also patent that the sacred executioner was in a like manner ignorant regarding it.

Zoda was a cunning man. He reflected for a few moments, then to the axe man he said:

"The gods must have carried off the white people, or they have discovered some secret of the palace unknown to us. I have heard it said that there are many secret places within this palace, which is the most ancient in our city, but there is one man—old Rizzvocolas, the builder—who planned and constructed this house. I will hasten to bid a company of the guards search every hole and corner of the place, and in the meantime I will send for Rizzvocolas, and if our victims have found a secret hiding place, the old man will soon find them out, I can assure you."

Zoda acted as he had promised.

The guards searched the palace everywhere, but no trace of the mysteriously vanished could be found anywhere within the palace.

By the time their search was completed the old man who had built the temple many years ago appeared.

"Now, then, we shall soon solve this riddle," said Zoda.

Rizzvocolas was an antiquated specimen of humanity.

The ancient architectural expert was past one hundred years of age, and yet he was as hale and hearty as a man of forty. Despite his white hair and general tout ensemble, which was most ancient, he seemed young.

Decidedly he was a well-preserved man.

Zoda made known the object for which he had sent for the old man.

Quickly Rizzvocolas conducted Zoda and his followers to the apartment which contained the movable idol, the mystery of which Leon had accidentally discovered.

Upon reaching this division of the palace, the old Inca builder hesitated for a moment, as though he were striving to recall some half-forgotten memory of the vague and shadowy past.

Zoda and the executioner of the altar of "The Steps of Doom" watched the old builder anxiously.

"Are you seeking to gather up some lost thread from the woof of the long past?" asked Zoda.

"I am. I am groping for a forgotten memory. The idol there; what was it that I invented about it? I cannot yet recall it. It was three-score periods ago. I almost grasp it. Give me a little time and it will all come back to me," said the aged architect.

Zoda and the executioner remained perfectly silent while the failing intellect of the old builder strove with the recollections of the long past.

The fate of the white prisoners hung upon his memory.

If Rizzvocolas recalled the mystery of the movable idol they would be dragged forth to their doom.

It was a moment fraught with fateful interest—a moment of dire and fearful import.

Would the old Inca recall the past?

Suddenly an expression of intelligence appeared upon the face of the aged Inca, and with resolute though tottering steps he arose and crossed the apartment.

Rizzvocolas went straight to the idol and placed his hand upon the head of the image.

The hour had come!

CHAPTER X.

THE MOUNTAIN SPEAKS—HALUALALA'S PROPHECY FULFILLED.

With breathless interest the priest of the sacrifice and the sacred executioner, with their followers, watched the strange, and, to them, incomprehensible movements of the aged architect of the Inca city.

Lightly at first the old man placed his hand upon the head of the idol.

The sculptured symbol of heathen worship moved not.

A trace of disappointment, a ray of indecision spoke in the aged man's expression.

It was evident that the secrets of the past were not as yet quite clearly defined upon his mental camera.

Again he paused.

Was it that the good angel of the white prisoners had cast the shadows of his wings athwart the old man's vision.

Was it that a power beyond and above the memory of man had interposed to blight the old builder's dawning recollection?

It seemed for a moment that such was the fact, but only for a moment.

Immediately the aged Inca pressed with all his might upon the head of the idol.

The graven image of the idolaters shot downward, and the opening at its back was revealed!

With a howl of intense satisfaction, Zoda and the several executioners of the altar of "The Steps of Doom" rushed forward.

"Ha! ha!" roared Zoda. "The mystery is solved—the secret is out! There is the door through which the victims of the sacrifice have vanished. After them, guards! Drag them from their hiding! They cannot escape, for all the gods of the Incas have willed that they should die for the salvation of our city. Out with them! Out with the white sacrifices!"

Several of the guards sprang through the opening behind the idol.

A moment elapsed, and then they reappeared, bringing with them Leon and Isabel.

Wild shouts and acclamations greeted the appearance of the white prisoners.

It was at this time that one of the guards rushed to the outer doors of the palace and communicated the intelligence of the discovery of the prisoners to his friends without, and it was the reception of this news which caused the shouts of triumph which fell upon the ears of Pedro Roma like a knell of doom.

Leon and Isabel made no resistance. To struggle were folly.

The young Spaniards saw death before them.

The dreadful specter loomed up before their mental vision in all its appalling terrors.

They had been taught to look upon the end of man with religious views, and sustained by their hopes, which it is the province of their faith ever to inculcate, they bowed now in resignation, or, at least, they seemed to do so, though the flashing eyes of Leon were not as meek in their expression as those of a martyr might have been supposed to be.

Between two files of guards the two white prisoners were marched out of the palace.

At sight of them old Pedro Roma covered his eyes with

his hands, and bitter tears streamed down the cheeks of the faithful old servitor.

"Lost! lost! They go to their doom, and I am powerless to aid them!" he moaned.

Upon his grief fell the shouts, yells, and joyful acclamations of the populace.

The priest of the mountain temple, Halualala, the Inca, was close at Pedro's side.

"Remember the prophecy I have made. When the mountains speak, the white prisoners shall have yet a chance for their lives," he said.

"Avaunt, false prophet! Curses upon all your race! I believe you not!" cried Pedro.

"Curse not, for by all the gods of the Incas, you shall see my words come true!" answered Halualala.

"I trust you no longer. Out of my sight, or I will kill you!" Pedro raved.

Halualala withdrew without another word.

Leon and Isabel were marched from the palace toward the terrible altar of the "Steps of Doom."

Suddenly before the guards who surrounded the white prisoners appeared the king's son, Lesandlas.

"Stop! stop!" he cried excitedly.

The guards came to a sudden halt, while from the thronging crowd there went up a fierce murmur of discontent.

"I would speak a word with the doomed whites before they mount 'The Steps of Doom,'" said the prince.

The guards at whose head marched Zoda and the sacred executioner, somewhat reluctantly gave way.

Lesandlas approached Leon and Isabel.

"I strove to save you, but my stern sire would not give heed to my prayer. White maiden, Lesandlas loves you, Lesandlas would die in your stead, could he do so, but, alas, that pleasure is withheld. I have come to give you the only assistance in my power," and as he bent close to Leon he slipped a dagger out of sight in the folds of the sash which the young Spaniard carried about his loins.

With this Lesandlas retired.

On, on, to the altar of "The Steps of Doom," marched the guards conducting their fated prisoners.

Leon's hand clutched his newly-acquired weapon.

The youth was brave.

The young scion of the ancient house of Gonzales knew not the meaning of the word fear!

Leon meant yet to make a last desperate fight for life were the chance afforded him.

Pedro Roma followed close behind Leon and Isabel, but the guards prevented his gaining a position very near them.

Halualala, the priest of the mountain temple, had rejoined Pedro and the Inca kept close to him.

Ever and anon Halualala cast anxious glances toward the distant volcanoes.

The priest of the Incas yet trusted that the prophecy which he had made to his white friends would be fulfilled.

At last the Steps of Doom were reached.

The guards paused at the foot of the altar.

Halualala, as priest of the mountain temple, by virtue of his office, the province of which it had been from time immemorial to bind the victims of the sacrifice, now came forward and appeared to securely bind the hands of both Leon and Isabel behind their backs.

The lower limbs of the two captives were left free, that they might walk up the Steps of Doom to the summit of the altar upon which they were to be sacrificed.

It will be remembered by the reader that according to the belief of the Incas, no human creature save Zoda, the anointed priest of the sacrifice and the sacred executioner, could ascend the Steps of Doom and live.

Leon and Isabel were placed side by side, and Zoda placed his hand upon the shoulder of the former, taking his place by his side.

The sacred executioner took Isabel by the arm, and in this order the ascent of the Steps of Doom was begun.

Slowly, the Inca priest and the sacred executioner marched their victims up the broad steps, down which no human being save the priest and executioner had ever come alive.

Half the long flight of steps had been ascended, when suddenly Leon's hands appeared free.

Quickly as the lightning's flash he drew the dagger which Lesandlas had thrust into his girdle, and with one fierce blow struck Zoda.

The priest of the altar fell face downward upon the Steps of Doom.

Before the sacred executioner could use his axe, which he seemed about to bring down upon Leon's head, the youth clutched his arm and struck him with the knife.

The executioner dropped his axe, threw up his arms and fell backward.

Seizing Isabel in his arms, Leon bounded up the Steps of Doom like a frightened deer, and in another moment the

two doomed white prisoners stood upon the summit of the sacred altar, where none dare follow them.

A terrific yell of rage went up from the crowd below, but in an instant this cry was changed to one of terror and dismay, for at that moment the earth shook to its very foundation, and there was a strange booming sound.

Again and again was this repeated, while from the volcanic mountains shot forth a dense cloud of smoke and ashes, rendering in a moment the bright day almost as gloomy as the darkest night.

An instant later through the gloom a hundred rivers of glowing fire—molten lava—could be seen pouring down the mountainside upon the doomed city.

The mountains had spoken according to Halualala's predictions.

Was his prophecy regarding the white prisoners to be fulfilled?

The populace fled in dire confusion. All thought of the sacrifice was forgotten.

At this moment, seeing a chance of escape, Leon and Isabel ran down the steps of doom, and at the foot of the stairs they were met by Pedro and Halualala.

"This way for your lives," shouted the priest, and he led them by a secret way from the city.

Scarcely had he left it when they saw the city overwhelmed in a sea of lava.

They were upon a spur of the mountains.

Casting one backward glance only upon the doomed city, they fled onward.

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

There was a rough mountain road ahead of the fugitives.

They ran ahead at the top of their speed, and saw some of the terrified inhabitants racing on ahead of them. They passed some of these people, who were too frightened to bother with their late prisoners. All were intent upon saving themselves as best they could. But presently they overtook a huge fellow armed with a spear. The moment he saw the white fugitives he uttered a yell of rage.

"Halt!" he shouted.

At the same time he drew back the spear to hurl it at Leon.

"It is Zoda's brother!" gasped Halualala in terror.

He knew what was coming.

"Yes!" cried the man fiercely; "I am Tezcan. I saw yon white dog slay my brother, and my heart cries out for vengeance."

"Run for your life!" implored the old priest, hoping to divert the angry man's thoughts. "See! The avalanche of fire is upon us. If you remain here you will perish."

"I care not what becomes of me," retorted the man. "I shall stay here long enough to avenge my brother. What then becomes of me I care not. You shall not escape me."

Isabel shuddered.

She had been watching the convulsive working of the man's face with eyes of terror.

She saw that Tezcan was reckless. He cared nothing for his life. Nothing but revenge would satisfy him.

Turning to her brother she fairly shricked:

"Leon! Run! I will hold him back."

As she spoke, she dashed at the native, and with a cruel look he swung the spear around.

It was aimed at her body now.

Leon had snatched up a stone.

He now hurled it at the man.

It struck him on the forehead and he gave a hoarse cry and reeled backward.

Falling heavily to the ground, he retained his grip on the spear.

He was only stunned a little and the old priest cried:

"Now is our time to escape him!"

"Take Isabel's hand, and I will take the other!" shouted Pedro. "We must help her."

With the girl between them, they ran at the top of their speed.

It was a steep path and the loose pebbles hurt their feet, but they paid no heed to personal discomfort.

They had gained a good lead before Tezcan revived.

But the moment he got on his feet and saw them getting away, he yelled something in his native tongue to the people who were stringing out along the road.

Some of them were near our friends, and Tezcan's words seemed to electrify them.

They made a rush for the four and made an effort to grab them.

"Defend yourselves!" cried Leon.

He struck out with his fists and knocked the nearest man flat.

Another came at him from the rear, and a swinging blow caught him on the jaw and toppled him over.

Pedro had attacked another and Halualala was valiantly defending Isabel against the assault of several others.

"Stand back!" the priest shouted at them frantically. "If you dare to lay a hand on this girl I will call down a curse from the gods upon you. Leave us alone, I say, or the fire will burn you and the mountains shall fall and bury you in the ruins."

They fell back.

Despite what Tezcan said, they had an inborn fear of their priest, and dreaded his prophecy.

The old man sprang behind a boulder with Isabel.

Meantime, Leon and Pedro had disposed of the ones who were attacking them, and the boy glanced up the road.

Tezcan was coming on a run.

Rage lent speed to his feet.

"We must put an end to him!" exclaimed Leon in resolute tones. "If he is not checked he will incite his friends to help him and they will make short work of us."

"Let me fight him!" begged Pedro.

"No! Leave him to me."

Leon still had the dagger which Lesandlas had given him.

He drew it and waited in the middle of the road for his enemy to approach.

The people who had been attacking them now hurried away.

The roaring of eruption and the shaking of the earthquake had gotten on their nerves.

They ran for their lives.

Our friends were left alone.

Tezcan saw the boy waiting for him and observed the dagger gleaming in his hand.

It made him more wary.

He realized that there was going to be a death struggle between them, and he slackened speed and prepared for it.

"Stop where you are, Tezcan!" Leon shouted to him in threatening tones. "If you try to renew the struggle you are a dead man. I am ready for you."

"I shall never retreat!" came the grim answer. "I am ready for you."

As he spoke he prepared his spear for a charge, and rushed forward like a thunderbolt.

The boy did not budge.

He kept his glance fixed steadily on the man, and judged with lightning speed what he was liable to do.

When Tezcan arrived within ten feet of the boy he drew back the spear to hurl it.

But Leon was too quick for him. He had the dagger poised and he hurled it with unerring aim straight at the man.

Through the air whizzed the glittering blade, and the point struck Tezcan's arm.

A yell of pain escaped him.

He paused, and the spear dropped from his hand to the ground.

"I have got him!" cried Leon.

At the same moment he ran toward Tezcan, but the moment he got in arm's length the wily native sprang forward.

He seized Leon and a wild yell of triumph escaped his lips.

The wound in his arm was forgotten, and he got a grip on the boy's throat and began to choke the life out of him.

Pedro saw what was happening, and he dashed forward like a tiger, while Isabel and the old priest ran from behind the rock.

A terrific struggle was now going on between Tezcan and Leon.

The boy found that he was no match for the powerful fellow.

"Help, Pedro, help!" he gurgled.

"I am coming!"

"You let go!" continued the boy, and he smashed Tezcan in the face with his fist.

A grunt escaped the man but he did not relax his deadly grip.

"You will only escape by way of the grave!" he hissed vindictively. "I'll choke the life out of you."

"Never!" cried Leon, and he rained a shower of blows on the man.

But Pedro now drew near.

Tezcan saw him.

A crafty idea flashed into his mind.

He hurled the boy to the ground and rushed into the woods.

Up sprang Leon and raced after him through the mesquite and palms.

They went crashing through the bushes, Pedro bringing up the rear.

Ahead there was a cliff.

Tezcan was luring the boy toward it with the determination to hurl him from it to his death.

Ignorant of his danger, Leon ran on, gaining at every step.

Suddenly Tezcan turned.

They grappled.

"Once more, and for the last time!" panted the man.

They went crashing through the bushes into a clearing.

It was a small plateau that commanded a view of the vast valley below.

"A trap!" gasped the boy.

"Yes! You will go down that abyss with me!"

"Not if I know it."

"There is no help for you. Come!"

He dragged the boy toward the edge.

Leon struggled with all his strength to hold back.

It was useless.

The man was too strong for him.

Nearer and nearer the edge he was dragged every moment.

He fought furiously to get away, but it was of no use.

He was not strong enough.

Now they reached the edge of the cliff and Tezcan roared:

"I will make sure of you by going over with you!"

"No! No!" panted Leon in horror.

Again they fought madly, and the earth and stone began to crumble beneath their feet.

Pedro was coming fast, but he was yet too far away to be of any material service.

Everything depending upon himself, Leon tried a desperate expedient.

Suddenly raising his knee, he drove it with awful force into the pit of Tezcan's stomach.

He grew weak and gave a gasping cry, his hold on the boy relaxed, and he staggered back.

As quick as lightning Leon gave him a blow in the face with his fist.

It caused the staggering man to lose his balance.

An awful cry pealed from his lips as he toppled backward.

The edge of the rock broke under his weight and he fell.

Down into the awful gulf he plunged, his death-cry ringing out above the roaring of the elements.

Weak, sick, and trembling, Leon reeled back against a tree, where he stood, shaking like a leaf.

The horror of the whole thing got on his nerves.

He was all bathed in a cold sweat, and his face was as pale as death.

Jut then Pedro came crashing through the chaparral.

"Leon!" he cried.

"Here!" faintly answered the boy.

"Injured?"

"No."

"Thank heaven!"

"The man is gone."

"Where?"

"Over the edge of the cliff."

"You fought?"

"Terribly. He tried to kill me."

"And you beat him?"

"Yes. Let us leave here. He will never trouble us again, Pedro."

"It is well. He was wicked."

"Where is Isabel?"

"Back in the woods with the priest."

"Let us join them. They are probably anxious about our fate."

They hurried back the way they came and finally reached the road. There they met the girl and the priest, and Isabel rushed up to Leon and flung her arms around his neck.

"My brother!" she sobbed. "Oh, I am so glad you have returned safe."

"I had a narrow escape."

"Where is Tezcan?"

"Dead."

"You killed him?"

"He fell from a cliff."

Showers of sparks were falling and the earth was shaking and rumbling fearfully.

"We must hurry away from here before the elements destroy us!" cried Leon, as he cast a glance of anxiety at his sister.

"Our only chance is to run for our lives," said Pedro. "Senorita, let me hold one of your hands and your brother the other."

"I am ready," she answered.

They started on a run.

Down the rough road they sped at breakneck speed

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Roar after roar was now coming from the mountain.

Vast jets of fire spurted up from the orifice of the volcano, and great clouds of black smoke rose to the clouds.

Every few moments there came a deafening roar like the discharge of a thousand batteries of artillery, and enormous masses of cinders were blown high in the sky.

Poisonous gases were issuing from crevices that opened in the mountain sides, the deadly fumes almost overwhelming the fugitives.

It was terrible.

A red glare overhung the scene, and hot cinders pelted down on them mercilessly.

All hands were tiring.

"I can't stand this much longer," panted Isabel.

She was pale and panting and so exhausted that she felt as if she would drop at any moment.

"Keep up your courage, I beg," gasped Leon. "Only a little further, and we will be safe."

"I can't," she answered weakly.

The old priest was peering around anxiously.

"Halt!" he exclaimed.

"What now?" demanded Pedro.

"I know where there is a cave that will shelter us until the worst of the eruption is over."

"Where? Where?"

"Just to the left there. Come."

He led the way, the rest tattering along in his wake.

A deep, grinding noise in the ground now pealed out, and a great fissure opened.

It made them shudder.

Avoiding it, they went on to a mass of rocks.

The old priest parted a mass of tangled vines, exposing to view an opening in the rocks, and said:

"Creep in there."

"A cave?" asked Leon.

"Yes."

Isabel went in first, the rest following.

It was dark in the retreat and the place had an odor of decayed vegetation.

Evidently it had been inhabited by some wild beasts in the past, for there were beds of dead leaves on the floor, and an animal odor filled the air.

Here, at least, there was safety from the hot cinders falling from the sky.

The ground was shaking under them with every shock that came from the volcano, but the air was less heated and less charged with the mephitic gases that had been half-smothering them.

Within a few moments the unfortunates began to revive after the awful ordeal they had been going through, and Leon exclaimed:

"This is much better!"

"I am parched with thirst," said Isabel.

"There is a spring near by," Halualala made answer. "I have a cup and will fill it."

He went out.

The rest waited anxiously.

Within a few minutes the old man returned and there was a sad look on his face, and he shook his head and said:

"I cannot get water. The spring is dried up."

Poor Isabel actually groaned.

But she said nothing.

Leon's heart was rent with pity for his sister.

He was frantic to help her, and he rushed from the cave and plunged into the shrubbery.

The rain of fire was still coming down from the sky.

He paid no heed to the burns and bruises, however, for he was in quest of the liquid his sister craved—a liquid that might save her life.

The boy was familiar with the vegetation of that country.

He was searching for a certain plant which grew like corn stalks, and he finally found several growing in a cluster.

With his knife he severed one of the stalks near the bottom.

Instantly there was a flow of water from the cut until he turned the stalk upside down.

This plant in the rainy reason absorbs considerable moisture, filling the trunk of its stalk.

Back to the cave hurried Leon, and in a few minutes more the girl's thirst was relieved.

There was more than enough water in the stalk for all hands.

Feeling much refreshed, they all lay down and rested.

For hours the raging of the eruption went on.

An awful heat now began to arise. It grew hotter every moment.

Leon went outside.

He now saw the cause.

A river of molten lava was pouring out of the crater and was running down the side of the mountain toward them.

A cry of horror escaped the boy.

He saw that the fiery stream would soon engulf them if they remained there.

Back to the cave he rushed.

"Come out! Come out! Your lives are in danger!" he shouted.

The rest rushed from the cave.

"What now?" asked Pedro.

"See the lava coming down?"

"We may escape it by running," said the priest. "It is our only chance. Once we reach the plains below we are safe."

"I am ready," said Isabel.

They started on down the mountain again.

Behind them came the hot stream of melted pumice.

It was a terrible race for life, for the lava was coming fast.

But the fugitives gained the level ground below.

Here they had less difficulty as they hurried along.

"We will try to reach San de Cappello," said the priest.

Some miles farther on they were given a lift by a man with a wagon.

In this manner they left the scenes of horror behind them.

Leaving the cart at a village they proceeded next day with all speed under the leadership of the old priest.

Halualala guided them safely to San de Cappello, and there to their inexpressible joy, they met their father; he had not been killed by Munzo, the renegade; only seriously wounded, but his enemy had left him for dead, and he had slipped away into the forest, and made his way to the mission.

The volcanic eruption buried the secret city forever from human sight.

Juan Munzo was soon after captured by the authorities, and executed. Don Gonzales and his family returned to their home, where they after resided in peace and prosperity.

Halualala and Pedro Roma became as brothers, and both for the remainder of their lives remained in the family of Gonzales.

THE END.

Read "'OLD SIXTY'; OR, THE LAST RUN OF THE SPECIAL," which will be the next number (9) of "All Around Weekly."

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CHOICE READING MATTER.

A compass without a magnetic needle has been invented by an artisan at Kiel, Prussia. It is in the form of a gyroscope, which, when suspended in a certain way, always adjusts itself to the earth's axis. The invention is regarded as of great importance to ironclads, where the compass-needle is frequently deflected by the adjacent metal.

In a boys' school in Trondjheim, Norway, the lads are taught cooking, and in this line show remarkable skill. Other male schools are to follow the practice. Women must look to their laurels. Ousted by men cooks in the highest professional walks of cookery, the ubiquitous "maid of all work" will presently have to make room for the "man of all work."

A butcher in Paris a few weeks ago called upon his customers with a tray of cutlets reposing on hundreds of banknotes. He asked each customer to choose a portion either of the meat or of the garnishing. Finally, when some citizens protested against his methods, he discharged a siphon of aerated water at them, smashed a plate-glass window, and pelted them with cutlets.

As a result of his interesting investigations, Dr. Ridgeway concludes that the smelting of iron originated in Central Europe, and especially in the region known as Noricum, equivalent to modern Austria and Bavaria. In Egypt it can be traced back to the ninth century B. C., and in Libya to about 450 B. C. First mention of its use in China goes back to 400 B. C., while in Uganda it is said to have been in use only some five or six centuries. The above date for the first use of iron in Egypt refers to the metal obtained by smelting. The use of native iron in the form of meteorites dates back to remote antiquity. The weapons made from these were obtained, like flint implements, by chipping. And it is interesting to remember that recent investigations have shown that the iron of many meteorites is a sort of natural steel.

Bitten by a rattlesnake in the calf of the right leg in the Santa Ana Mountains, California, recently, John McCornick, a rancher of Grapeland, saved his life by making an incision with his pocket knife and inserting a piece of the reptile's flesh in the wound. He bandaged it tightly and walked seven hours before he reached his ranch, where he could receive medical treatment. Dr. Summer J. Quint was called from Los Angeles to attend McCornick. When he arrived he found that his patient was suffering from a slight poisoning. He declared that McCornick saved his life by his own treatment. McCornick was hunting through scrub oak when he felt a peculiar sting in his leg. He looked down and saw the snake dragging on the ground as he walked. Its fangs had become fastened in his leggings and it was unable to withdraw them. With the butt of his gun McCornick knocked the snake off and then crushed its head with his heel. As quickly as possible he ran into the open and carried the snake with him. When he bared his leg he squeezed all the blood he could out of the two punctures which the fangs had made. Then he opened a gash, cutting through the two wounds and letting out the blood and poison. He cut a piece of flesh out of the snake's back and inserted it in the wound. McCornick used his handkerchief for bandages and then tied his leg again just above the knee to stop the poison from working through his system. McCornick was miles from any settlement where he could secure medical attention, so he started back to Grapeland. His leg pulsated with pain and he soon became deathly sick. In his weakened condition he was compelled to rest on the road time and again. When he finally reached home he was almost exhausted and his leg was dreadfully swollen and almost black. McCornick says that his treatment was famous among the Indians for snake bites, and he has known of a number of instances where its application has saved lives.

RIB TICKLERS.

Wife (timidly)—Can you let me have a dollar, dear? Husband (testily)—No, I can't. Haven't I just spent $2,300 on an automobile?

Jim—Say! If you'll notice, you'll see that most of those big Wall Street men started on a farm. Sam—Yes, and that is where they learned to water stock.

Johnny Alfalfa was asked to parse the word cow, and he did so in this wise: "Cow is the noun in the present tense—she switches her tail against the fence."

"Let me sell you a letter-opener," said the clerk in the novelty store. "Have one at home," responded the little man. "Indeed! What kind is it?" "My wife."

Fond Mother—Don't you think baby is very like his father? Friend of the Family—The living image. Same lack of expression, same want of intelligence, no teeth to speak of—and, by jove, yes, prematurely bald, too!"

In a certain school of Washington there was one lad who would persist in saying "have went." One day the teacher "kept him in," saying: "While I am out of the room you may write 'have gone' fifty times." When the pedagogue returned he found that the boy had dutifully performed the task, having written "have gone" fifty times. On the other side of the paper, however, was this message from the absent one "I have went.—John White."

When Miss Marlowe and Mr. Sothern played last in Atlanta they were greeted by a very large house. The dusky housemaid in a certain prominent family occupied a balcony seat in a group of high-fliers in darktown society. Next day her mistress was curious to know Lilly's opinion of the play and players. Her questioning betrayed Lilly's ignorance of even the name of the play. Lilly assured her mistress, however, that a paper, brought home as a cherished souvenir, would tell the name. Returning, program in hand, she exclaimed: "Yesum! Hit's on here. I knowed hit was. Hit was the 'Cast o' Characters'!"

A RED TRAIL

By Alexander Armstrong.

As I stood beside the body of poor Hugh Armsley, as he lay cold in the icy embrace of death, while beside him knelt his wife and a fair-haired little girl, whom a cowardly assassin bullet had made a widow and an orphan, I registered in my own mind a solemn oath to avenge my comrade's death by bringing his slayer to the gallows.

Hugh Armsley was a brother detective here in the city of New York, and years of fellowship and association in the detective business had begot a firm friendship between us.

Hugh and I had been for some time on the trail of Dan Sibley, a most skilled counterfeiter and the one time confederate of the notorious firm of "Doyle & Brockway," the counterfeiters of United States bonds, of whom everybody knows.

Hugh, single-handed and alone, had attempted the capture of the desperate Sibley in an all-night dive here in the city, but Sibley, who was known to have spent many years in the wilds of the Far West, was remarkably quick on "the draw," and, getting the drop on my detective "pard," he sent a leaden messenger of death through his heart, instantly killing one of the bravest and truest men I ever knew.

Sibley made good his escape, and although I devoted every effort to the task of tracing the assassin for a long time, he baffled me, and his trail was a hidden one.

Firm in my purpose and true to the oath I had taken, I made it the one grand and ever present object of my life to strike Dan Sibley's track.

At last I did strike his trail, and "a red trail" it proved.

Three months after the assassination of Hugh Armsley I knew to a positive certainty that "my man" was in Nevada.

He had been spotted at Pioche, and also at Gold Hill.

I was in Nevada immediately after receiving the intelligence from Frank Day, the great Western railway detective.

From Gold Hill I trailed Dan Sibley to the new mining claim of Rader's canyon (new in 18—, though old now).

The day after my arrival there I spotted my man.

I saw him in a saloon called the "Wild Wilderness," and with him was a smooth-faced fellow who bore the imprint of scoundrel upon every lineament of his sneaking visage as plainly as though the word had been indelibly stamped there by the hand of fate.

But Sibley had made himself a favorite in the camp, and I learned he was "solid" with the vigilantes and I realized the extreme danger of making an attempt to arrest him on the old charge of the murder of Hugh Armsley, of which the cunning assassin's rude associates were utterly ignorant.

A little reflection fully convinced me that I could only hope to arrest my man and take him away from the gulch by convicting him of some crime committed there.

The very day I "spotted" him in the "Wild Wilderness" saloon I became convinced that he and his smooth-faced associate were plotting some crime.

Getting near the two, I caught these words which were uttered by Sibley:

"To-night at ten, Damond."

"All right, I'll be there," was the answer of the man whom Sibley called Damond.

I had never seen Damond before, and, of course, I was entirely unknown to him, and although I was cleverly disguised, of course, there was less risk of detection in shadowing Damond the stranger, than in following Sibley.

Then and there I instantly made up my mind to become the living shadow of Mr. Damond, trusting that such a course would enable me to learn more of the business on foot between the villains.

I was not wrong in this supposition, and that night, after hours of close surveillance, my man Damond led me to a cabin at the end of the gulch.

The place was a dark and secluded pass, and the cabin was built against the mountainside.

Damond entered the cabin.

I crept up to the door.

Scarcely had I reached it, when an awful cry of human agony burst upon the silence of the lonely gulch, and then all was still.

Intuitively I knew a deed of blood had been done within that solitary cabin, and I was about to dash forward and lend a helping hand to the poor imperiled one whose voice had reached my ears, when the door was dashed open and Dan Sibley and the man called Damond came out.

Between them they carried the body of a young man, whose attire served at once to convince me that he was a miner.

I sprang back unobserved into the shadow of a great bowlder.

"Now, then, to make sure work with the body, and then to secure the papers. This night's work, if consummated properly, means a fortune for us both," said Sibley.

"Yes; but, Dan Sibley, I've a strange feeling that we are watched; a presentiment that human eyes are upon me is in my mind, and I cannot shake it off," said Damond, casting an apprehensive glance about him.

"Then, by Heaven, we'll prove its truth or falsehood!" said Sibley, in a fierce tone of voice.

He dropped the feet of the body, and his comrade deposited the head and shoulders of their victim upon the ground.

Then they drew their bowie-knives and started toward the very bowlder behind which I crouched.

It was a moment of suspense and peril for me, but my trusty revolver was in my hand, and I meant to "down" my foes before their murderous knives could reach me.

They were almost upon me, and the glint of the gleaming blades clutched in their hands, reflected by the light of the moon, flashed in my eye, when suddenly from a thicket between two trees at my side a young and beautiful girl sprang up.

I drew back out of sight as a cry burst from the girl's lips.

The next moment Dan Sibley clutched her hand as she turned to flee, and his heavy hand fell upon her shoulder.

The knife had fallen from his hand.

Damond, his companion, was concealed by the thicket he had not yet passed.

"Mariam, you here!" exclaimed Sibley.

"Yes, I am here, Dan. Oh! have you killed him?" gasped the girl.

"Yes," hissed Sibley. "And now I think I suspect the truth. You meant to warn him—you meant to thwart my plot and save his life."

"I did, I did! Oh, now I know that you are worse even than I suspected. I am a lost and wretched woman. Oh! why did I listen to your false vows of love; why did I leave my happy home in Omaha to follow the fortunes of a mur——"

"Hush, girl, or by Heavens I'll strangle you!" thundered Sibley. "You know too much now for me ever to permit you to leave me. While you live you shall not. Down on your knees—down, I say, and swear never to reveal what you know of this night's work, or you die!"

As he spoke he picked up his knife and menaced the girl.

Damond bounded to the side of his confederate, and his knife too was raised over the heart of the defenseless girl.

It was an awful tableau, there at dead of night in the

silent canyon, but my revolvers, for I had one in each hand, now covered the villains, and the girl was not in as much danger as she thought. A pressure of my finger would have sent a bullet through both their hearts.

The girl, in terror, sank upon her knees.

"I swear to keep your awful secret," she said.

"That is well. I know you will keep your word. Now, away, and never, while you live, follow me again, or seek to learn my secret, or you die," said Sibley.

Shuddering, but without a word, the girl turned and fled away toward the camp, never once casting a glance behind her.

The assassins then raised the body of their victim and hurled him over the ledge, beyond which there was a fall of ten feet to the bed of a dry stream.

"Now to get his certificate of deposit, and in the morning we will draw his gold from the bank and be off," said Sibley.

He dashed into the cabin and soon reappeared with a paper in his hand.

"I have it—I have it. At last George Darrell's fortune is ours. Come, Damond, we'll now return to the camp. This has been the greatest night's work I ever did, and I am well satisfied with it," said Sibley.

In a moment they were gone.

I stole forth.

Hastening to the edge of the cliff, over which they had thrown the body, I peered down into the darkness, and then began to climb down to the bed of the gulch.

Reaching the bottom, I paused to listen for a moment.

A pebble from above came rattling down and struck at my feet, and I looked quickly up, but saw no one.

I stood motionless, and to my ears there presently came a groan.

Instantly the thought flashed upon my mind that the assassins had not made sure work of their victim—that he yet lived.

I groped about, and my hands came in contact with a body.

Another groan convinced me that the man called Darrell was not dead yet.

I knelt beside him, and, as well as I could in the semi-gloom, examined him.

While thus engaged my attention was, of course, engrossed with the wounded one to the exclusion of that watchful alertness which should have characterized all my proceedings.

Suddenly a bright light flashed in my face.

It was the light from a dark lantern, and I found myself confronted by four men in dark masks, and four rifles were leveled at my heart.

It was a terrible surprise, but quick as the lightning's flash I drew my revolver and covered the foremost of the band.

"When I count three, fire!" cried the foremost of the party, whose voice I recognized as that of Sibley.

"One, two," continued the desperado.

"Hold!" I shouted. "Your men have the drop on me, but if you pronounce the word three, you will receive a bullet in your own heart, although I fall riddled with bullets, for I've got a 'dead bead' on you, and I never miss my mark."

"That's so!" exclaimed the rough.

"Send your men away and retire with them. I know not who you are, but if you are road agents, as I suspect, let me assure you I have nothing worth robbing me of. I have just found the dead body of a friend of mine, and I mean to bury him here at once, that his remains may not be desecrated by the ravenous wolves," I went on.

"All right, pard. Go on with your funeral. We won't trouble you if you are out of dust. Come along, boys," said Sibley.

He and his gang turned away, and to himself I heard him mutter:

"This is as I want it. With our victim buried by one of his friends the suspicion entertained by Damond that life might not have been extinct amounts to nothing, but I'm not sorry we came back when we met two of our confederates."

When the assassins were gone I set about the restoration of George Darrell; he was soon restored to consciousness. I then dressed his wounds, which were not serious, and before day I had him safely concealed in a cabin in the town.

The young man was a successful miner from California, and a new arrival of the camp, who, but a few days before, had deposited a large sum of money at the only bank in the place.

I was struck by the remarkable resemblance between him and his would-be assassin, and intuitively I suspected the real nature of the plot of which he had almost been made the victim.

Early that morning I was closeted with the bank officials.

Shortly after the opening of the bank, my man, Dan Sibley, accompanied by Damond, entered it.

I was standing in a corner near the door of the president's private office.

Under the window were a couple of trusty men who had been recommended to me by the bank officials.

Sibley approached the cashier and presented the certificate of deposit he had stolen from George Darrell's cabin.

"I'd like to get the money on that, if you please," he said.

The cashier took the certificate, and, looking up, asked:

"Are you George Darrell?"

"Yes, sir," was the bold answer of the assassin, who relied upon his resemblance to the man he supposed he had murdered to carry out the deception.

"That's a lie!" I cried, wheeling and facing Dan Sibley. "You are the liar! Are you drunk or a fool that you dispute my identity?" said Sibley, feeling for his revolver, while his companion did the same.

I never made a move "to pull."

I had my plans laid in advance.

"Look behind you, Dan Sibley, and you, too, Damond," I said, quietly.

The pair of villains wheeled about, and saw that the two men under the window, which was open, had quietly drawn a bead on them with their revolvers, which rested on the window-sill.

"Trapped!" cried Sibley, and then turning on me, he said: "In the fiend's name, who are you?"

"Clyde, the detective, and I denounce you as the murderer of Hugh Armsley, of New York," I replied.

At the same moment the door of the bank president's private office was dashed open, and George Darrell appeared, as had been arranged that he should.

"And I denounce you as my attempted murderer! Villain, impostor, demon! I am George Darrell!" cried the young miner.

As the words escaped his lips, Dan Sibley and Damond made a dash for the door.

At the same time the two revolvers in the hands of the men at the window rang out, and Damond fell, shot through the heart, while Sibley went down with a bullet in his leg.

I took Sibley to New York, and he met his doom on the gallows.

As for the girl whom I had seen at the cabin of Darrell, she proved to be Sibley's wife.

The rascal had induced her to run away with him, but she was only too glad to return to her parents.

George Darrell took her home, and a year later she became his happy wife.

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